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Finding My Penis in the Counselling Room

From Disempowerment to Self-Determination and Agency

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Abstract

The powerful cultural discourses within which we live, and the stereotypical gender constructions that impinge upon each one of us, produce internalised power relations that can be both oppressive and liberating. We internalise power dynamics which we enact within ourselves and in relations with others. Such power differentials also converge or collide in the counselling room. It is therefore vital that counsellors practise with a clear and deep self-awareness of both our own internal insecurities and absorbed gender constructions. As a female counsellor grappling with these challenges, I decided to write this article using colloquialisms for male genitalia as a metaphorical attempt to resist such stereotypes and share my own vulnerabilities that impact upon my practice. This is an invitation to other practitioners to embrace their tender spots and bring them into connection with others.

Keywords: Sociocultural discourses, gender construction, patriarchy, power, agency, counsellor self-awareness

Recently I was telling a girlfriend about an incident in which I stood up to someone who was using bullying tactics to try to make me comply with their wishes. On hearing my story, my friend said, "Wow! You've got big balls!" While later reflecting on this, I realised I felt quite disgruntled that someone would attempt to liken my inner strength to a part of the male anatomy. I began to wonder where such a comment came from and my mind turned toward the powerful discourses within which we live.

The popular idea that penis size and performance directly relate to a man's strength, power, and manliness is a dominant discourse in wide circulation, as evidenced by the number of YouTube videos that promise that the harder and bigger your penis, the more of a man you will be. Another powerful discourse that forces women into culturally

acceptable feminine behaviour is the idea that we should be docile, compliant, and submissive. The concept of a "powerful woman" is often associated with being a "bitch" (Brown, 2008, p. 24), or if a woman openly expresses anger she is seen as unladylike and, if aiming this at a man, she is called a witch, a man-hater or a nag (Lerner, 2004). I find it interesting that when a woman shows power or strength, she is often described as being like a man, or at least a man's appendage.

However, the idea of having a penis and balls was somehow quite enlightening, as it drew me to consider my own internalised gender constructions, particularly my own femininity and whether, from a psychodynamic viewpoint, I have any "masculine parts." In the same way that discursive practices reproduce culturally dominant discourses, they can also produce resistance to that domination (Gaddis, Kotzé, & Crocket, 2007). I therefore decided that the term "penis," used as a metaphor for my own power or strength (or "masculine part"), is an apt way to attempt to resist such stereotypes. It is also an empowering way to write about a specific fear I have as a counsellor, which affects my work with some clients and is the topic of this article.

What scares me?

While I enjoy working with most female clients, I find I am sometimes challenged when it comes to working with men. My history with heterosexual men, which I will discuss shortly, has been the cause of much anxiety and fear not only in my personal life but in the counselling room as well. Power and control have been used as tactics to force me to submit to these men throughout my life and so the topic of power is the focus of this article.

As a believer that we should face our fears and allow them to help us to grow, I have consistently attempted to work on this issue since I discovered it. Personally, I am learning to stand up for myself and not allow men to treat me this way, while professionally I have chosen to continue challenging myself and am determined to grow by working with men. I address any countertransference that arises by taking it to supervision. Clarkson (2004) points out two different types of countertransference—"reactive countertransference," where a counsellor reacts to a client's own projections, feelings and/or behaviour, and "proactive countertransference," where the counsellor's own unresolved conflicts intrude into the therapeutic relationship (p. 93). Indeed, I find I need to address both of these in my practice. However, proactive countertransference is triggered within me more often, and I find during those times that I suffer what Culbertson (2004) more literally experiences—the disappearance of my "penis" in the therapy room.

My story

In early childhood my parents divorced, which resulted in a deep loss of attachment for both my father and myself. Complex issues prevented us from re-establishing a close relationship until years later. The reproduction of powerful discourses of both masculinity and femininity, established from familial history and current sociocultural expectations, affected our relationship. For instance, "men should not show weakness and vulnerability," "women should act with decorum," and "children should be seen and not heard" were common discourses that influenced us both, making it difficult for us to connect in the way we desired.

Because of this relational deficit, I looked to boys to meet my needs for affection. Many of these young men only wanted sex and used forms of power and control to try to obtain it. Later, in my first job as a receptionist, my boss stood behind me when I was working at the computer late one evening and attempted to touch my breasts. The following week, when we were driving to a meeting, he attempted to attack me sexually. By this stage, I was beginning to see men as both powerful and unsafe.

My experience of certain church pastors also added to my growing distrust in men and fear of their power. Dominant Christian discourses said I should be submissive to all men, and especially subservient to church leaders. Women were to be quiet, dress appropriately, live in submission to their husbands, and be the bearers of many children. A pastor told me, when observing my adolescent, sanguine behaviour, "You need to get married and have ten strapping lads. That will sort you out." I was publicly shamed at a youth-group meeting when we were told never to marry anyone from a divorced home. I was also disciplined by leaders after one of the young men told them that *I* had given *him* an erection because of the way I dressed.

Marriage, too, became a familiar repeat scenario of the same dominant discourses and treatment. Socialised not to be vulnerable or show weakness, and always to remain in control, my husband shied away from intimacy. My beliefs that women should submit and always please their husbands prevented me from calling for change. We had both suffered from the 20 years of psychological abuse and tactics of power and control that were used to ensure compliance with the norms.

The effect of these experiences was a combination of emotional and mental anguish, spiritual guilt, and loss of confidence which resulted in destructive behaviours of addiction and phobia. A lot of time spent dealing with this in therapy, as well as several writers (e.g., Bancroft, 2002; Douglas, 1994; Miller, 2007), helped me to heal. The main effect, however, was what I call "the erosion of self." I experienced this as a slow erosion

of my choices, opinions, feelings, and confidence, with each abusive cycle resulting in more hopelessness and a deepened sense of giving up my authentic self. I lost my voice and felt completely disempowered (or dismembered). Whenever I was around men I felt fearful, and also highly anxious if I had to speak to them. Most often, I silenced myself when in their company. My natural reaction was to yield to whatever they wanted, and I was left with little sense of self, little strength, and suppression of my own "masculine part"—my power.

My story reveals the multiple, complex inter- and intra-personal processes at work throughout these years and the deep impact of both familial and wider socio-cultural discourses on the way I viewed myself, both as a being and as a woman, and on my behaviours, particularly when with men. Gaddis, Kotzé, and Crocket (2007) tell us these sorts of interactions can have the effect of "essentialising" experience, or treating it as "unquestionable truth," and that these internalised "essentialist gender ideas" cannot be escaped by any of us (p. 37). Indeed, I believed that the discourses that "men are more powerful than women," "all men want is sex," and "women should submit to men" were true. These discourses affected my behaviour greatly when I was around men until I began the arduous task of challenging them and deconstructing who I had become.

Power

In Hertzberg's (1996) terms, the patriarchal society we live in "produces inter-locking webs of power-based relationships" (p. 129). She drew attention to the many different ways in which we internalise these relationships, depending on our position in our familial and wider culture. Each of us internalises both oppression and privilege, and these dynamics influence how we see ourselves, others, and our world and are "played out" within our own self and in our relations with others (p. 130). I especially relate to what Hertzberg (1996) calls "the dynamics of empowerment" and "powerlessness" (p. 130). When around "strong" men, I felt powerless. When around "weak" women, I felt more powerful. What this reveals is that, in both cases, I was caught in a dynamic of powerlessness rather than being in charge of my own agency, of which I write more later.

Brown (2008) defines "power over" as a form of social control, rather than as an entity we possess and can give to, or take from, someone. She believes social power "forces us into gender straitjackets, then convinces us that we put them on ourselves and that we enjoy wearing them" (p. 24). The tendency to view power as a "powerful–

powerless dichotomy" in itself may "disempower and marginalise clients" (Pease, 2002, p. 138). In this dualistic way of thinking, counsellors may believe *they* hold the power to empower clients. Instead, all people have a "capacity for inner power" and therefore have the ability to develop "power against" through resistance (Pease, 2002, p. 139).

Other postmodernist writers also hold to the Foucauldian idea of power as being exercised rather than possessed. To Foucault, power is both relational and productive (Foucault, 1980). Cooper (1994) agrees that power should be conceptualised as both positive and productive, for it "shapes, creates and transforms social relations, practices and…processes" (p. 437). Seen in this way, the ubiquitous nature of power suggests the possibility for social change, even when it is not used that way. Central to all social relations and practices, it can be both "oppressive" and "liberatory" (p. 435). Discussing "disciplinary power," or power that regulates human life and imposes certain behaviours, Gavey (1992, p. 327) agrees with Foucault that power is not a unitary force operating independently of humans or only from a hegemonic repression. Rather, power can be "positive" as it produces "meanings, desires, behaviours, [and] practices" (p. 327). This view, Gavey believes, allows women to understand our complicity with male dominance as part of a process of "our own subjugation" through disciplinary regulation (pp. 327–328).

Both Gavey (1992) and Cooper (1994) identified the technique of the panopticon as key in the construction of power. Sociocultural disciplinary power regulates and normalises subjects until they become self-policing, watching everything they say and do in order to comply with the norms (Gavey, 1992). Cooper (1994) calls this a woman's "internalisation of the view of the 'other' to produce self-monitoring subjects" (p. 437). In this way a woman internalises what the "other" is proclaiming, even if she may not hold the same belief. In Bartky's (1988) analysis of femininity, she notes how a woman becomes an "inmate of the Panopticon" by "relentless self-surveillance," which she says is a "form of obedience to patriarchy" (p. 81). In this way, Bartky suggests, "a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women" (p. 72).

Impact on practice

My experiences of actual subordination, combined with the unnoticed dominant masculine and feminine gender stereotypes that surrounded me through those years, formed in me a vigilant eye that quickly guided me to comply, submit, defer, silence, and make sure I remained a "nice lady" when around men. In this sense I became, as Bartky (1988) says, my own jailer. Before a male client even came into the session, I

was already experiencing a perceived power-over, a retreating into myself, a lessening of my own power, or the retraction of my "penis," simply because it was a man entering the room, even though he may never have exercised his power in this way. *I* was automatically subjugating *myself* in panopticon style before we even started.

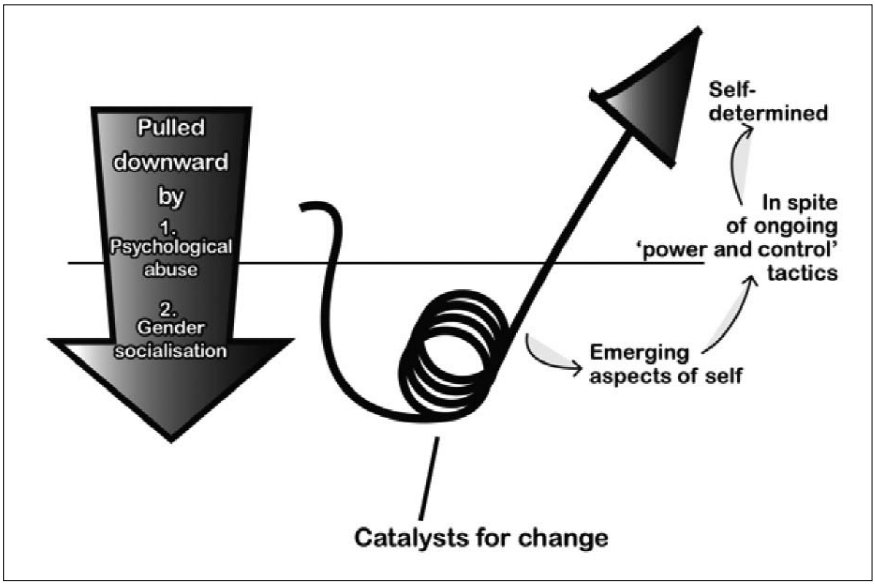
Viewing power in this way challenges me to take responsibility for my complicity as an action of my own agency. It renders me accountable and removes the temptation to view myself as a powerless victim. However, at the time, the impact of all this was frightening and now, looking back, I am thankful that I only saw a few male clients before beginning work on this issue. I could not challenge my clients for fear of their reaction. I was anxious throughout every session. One client was sexually attracted to me and instead of inviting him to talk about it, as I would now, I panicked and quickly referred him on. Another client became angry in the room and I completely lost my voice and could not carry on the session. Another client was controlling his wife and I became defensive and angry toward him. The time for a new vision and approach had come. I needed healing. I needed strengthening. I needed to rediscover and act on my inner power. I needed to allow my "penis" to emerge in the counselling room. I needed to "rise up" and learn to "hold onto myself" while working with men.

Toward self-determination and agency

When researching the effects of psychological abuse on women, Murphy (2002) found that reclaiming the self and recovery were common processes for women while saving themselves from abuse. She found women were "pulled downward" by the abuse as well as by gender socialisation (p. 130). Catalysts for change such as becoming aware of the issue, personal disintegration, psychological and physical illness, and/or experiences of validation by others, helped to move women from a narrow definition of self to a broader sense of self. The ongoing emergence of new and authentic aspects of self, despite continuous use of tactics by partners, brought about a new self-determination. Murphy's diagram outlining these dynamics (Figure 1) captures pictorially my metaphor for my own process toward discovering and acting from my own "masculine part" (Murphy, 2002, p. 130).

The term "agency" is often used by postmodern writers to describe what it means to live and act in our own power. For example, Monk and Drewery (1994) observed that in order to establish an "ethical human relationship, both persons in an interaction must be…seen as full moral agents" (p. 10). Talking about agency as personal authorship and choice "brings forth the idea of a 'self' that has agency or personal power" and is able to

Figure 1. Emerging self-determination (Murphy, 2002)



make "preferred decisions" (Dixon, 2002, p. 18). Writing about developing agency in abusive relationships, Lempert (1996) noted that abused women are actually "active, although not co-acting equals…with their partners" (p. 270) and they develop their own strategies to cope with, stop, or change the abuse. Utilising these types of "agentic" strategies, women manage the effects of violence (p. 280) and, as I was, are using their power in ways to survive.

In fact, when my postmodern therapist reflected to me that the strategies I was using were actually clever and proactive forms of resistance to abuse, my whole view of my process changed. I discovered I was not a victim of abuse but, instead, held agentic power and could therefore act on my power and bring about change. As Lerner (2004) has written, the only power we really do have is "the power to take charge of [our] own self" (p. 23). Brown (2008) concurred, declaring, "the only way to free ourselves from 'power-over' is to reclaim our real power—the power to create and live by our own definitions" (p. 25). In the words of Cooper (1994), "the 'essence' of power is the 'activated' subject's own sense of agency" (p. 437). My rise out of the entrapment of social discourses and the debilitating effects of the misuse of power and control gave

me a real sense of determination and hope. I found my masculine part, I discovered what it meant to stand erect, and I discovered the joy of holding onto myself when in the presence of men.

A renewing self: Effects on practice

As I work toward living authentically and exercising my internal strength, I am better able to connect with the men I work with. I am better empowered to deal with the anxiety that arises at times and the proactive countertransference that can emerge in session (Clarkson, 2004). I can sit with male clients and talk with them openly about their sexuality and vulnerabilities. Because of my studies on hierarchies of masculinities (see Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), I can work with men who are controlling and abusive toward their partners as I have a renewed insight into their own gender socialisation and suppression of *their* authenticity and vulnerability (or feminine part). I have a new empathy for men affected by such socialisation who experience suppression and domination similar to that experienced by many women. I am continuing to learn to allow my "penis" to emerge as I dialogue with certain powerful men and hold my own in the discussion. I am no longer as scared or as anxious.

Doing our personal work

The idea of power, however, continues to baffle me somewhat as a counsellor. While it is widely acknowledged that there is a power differential innate in every counsellor–client relationship, my experience has also been that power differentials can be significant in supervisory relationships as well. Indeed, it is most often fear, shame, and insecurity that cause us to take positions of power and control. I want to challenge any need I have for taking "power-over" positions because of my own insecurities. This draws me to think of the famous therapist Robert Lindner (1955) who, while working with his patient Kirk Allen, became aware of his own personal insecurities and spuriousness. His beliefs of self-superiority and the contempt he held for his "feeble" patients were exposed. This awareness drew him to exclaim, "I know that my chair and the couch are separated only by a thin line. I know that it is, after all…a…combination of accidents that determines, finally, who shall lie on that couch, and who shall sit behind it" (p. 272).

Embelton (2002) invited us to look at the therapeutic relationship from the same level of awareness and to expose the authentic underlying, and sometimes "dangerous", feelings, thoughts, and desires, operating both within and between client and therapist,

and/or therapist and supervisor, by "penetrating the celluloid respectability of therapy" (p. 120). Of course, discussing one's penis and balls is hardly respectable, yet there is something profound that occurs when we get real with each other—when we penetrate the solid, professional, "I have it all together" image that many of us bear.

It was this discourse, that counsellors should have it all together, that triggered much shame in me because I was a counsellor working through the impact of my personal experiences. I find it incredible that some people in both the Christian and secular counselling communities judged me for the struggles I experienced, and the process I went through, in recovering from psychological abuse. For counsellors, the personal difficulties we have experienced in life are often the issues that both drew us to this work and enable us to resonate and empathise deeply with our clients. In her poignant research into shame, Brown (2008) has written that regardless of who we are, what work we do, or how we were raised, we all fight "hidden, silent battles against not being good enough, not having enough and not belonging enough" (p. 127). In having the courage to share our vulnerabilities and authentic struggles, "we force shame out of hiding and end the silence" (Brown, 2008, pp. 127–128).

In some respects this has been my impetus for writing this article. It certainly helped me discover where Lindner's thin line lay. I concur with Kottler (2010), who invites therapists to consider that "The more clients talk about subjects that touch on our own unresolved issues, the more insecure and incompetent we feel about ourselves" (p. 13). Miller (2007) has stressed the importance of therapists recognising, facing, and mourning the painful truths from our pasts so that we do not transfer unconscious and unresolved needs onto our clients. If we are to be effective in our practice as counsellors, we need to face ourselves and deal with every challenge and insecurity that arises so that we do not misuse our power in the counselling room. After all, how can we bear to look at another's "penis" unless we can first handle looking at our own?

Conclusion

It never ceases to amaze me that I come from a long line of feminists, some of whom were involved in changing this country's voting laws for women and the emancipation of women in Britain (see Fry, 1992), yet I was still pinned under dominant patriarchal discourses. Even though my great grandfather, H. G. Wells, wrote and lived liberally and freely, compared to the culture that surrounded him, discourses of patriarchy were still reproduced through my family line. Perhaps this reflects how potent and inexorable gender socialisation can be.

However, as Andrews (1998) says, your history does not determine your destiny. I was made for better things. The effects of my history that I note in this article have enabled me to grow and helped me to find another way. The joy of discovering my "masculine part" is helping me to rise up and effect change in my family. My "penis" is assisting me to challenge social discourses as I hear them flaunted in society, and in rising up "erect" I can stand against the injustice of inequality. This knowledge helps me reflect on these issues with clients and challenge them to do the same, and I am seeing healing come for suppressed men and women. In discovering that I have "balls," I am finding a new self-determination. I can celebrate that I have "feminine" *and* "masculine" parts. As Culbertson (2008) wrote, I needed to learn who I was not, in order to discover who I am, and I am still on the journey.

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