

Using Althusser's Notion of Interpellation to Study the Politics of Therapeutic Practice

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ABSTRACT *Althusser's distinction between the Absolute, Other Subject and the ordinary human subject has been relatively ignored in the therapeutic literature. This is unfortunate because it offers an unusually clear conceptual tool for analysing the ideological participation – or rather, the participation in societal power dynamics – of therapeutic participants. I argue here that reconceptualizing Althusser's ideas, from a Marxist to a discourse-oriented approach, facilitates an analysis of therapeutic activities as simultaneously micro-psychological and macro-political events. A textbook sample of a cognitive-behaviour therapy session is used to illustrate some of the potentials of Althusser's insights for analysing the politics of therapeutic interaction. Copyright © 2009 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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How should we study the relationship between therapeutic practices and societal networks of power? This interaction has been the subject of much debate, leading some to posit the fundamental inextricability of politics and psychotherapy (e.g., Totton, 2000, 2006) and to propose it as a field of study in its own right (e.g., the *Psychotherapy and Politics International* journal). However, the impact of this growing literature on therapy training and practice is questionable and it seems to coincide with increasingly systematic pressures being placed on practitioners to comply with the interests of powerful medical, legal, insurance organizations and political institutions (cf. Proctor, 2002; House and Loewenthal, 2008). Therapists are being encouraged to work in ways that 'fit in' with, rather than challenge, these power networks. One of the obstacles to questioning this process is power's tendency towards invisibility, which, as Foucault (e.g., 1980, 1990) noted, is facilitated by modern power's interaction with knowledge. The power/knowledge dynamic means that power's administration is often experienced as the innocent dissemination and practise of truth – whether referred to as 'science', 'empirical findings' or 'data'. Under such circumstances, resistance comes to look like a naïve and obstinate refusal of knowledge, of science, or – in the case of psychotherapy – of 'empirical validated' findings. Power's concealment makes resistance seem wrong headed.

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Thus, the issue of visibility becomes an important question for the critically minded practitioner. How can we make power and its operations visible and hence empirically accessible? Among the steps taken in this regard are studies exploring therapeutic practices using discourse analytic procedures (e.g., Hare-Mustin, 1994; Soal and Kottler, 1996; Guilfoyle, 2001; Avdi, 2005). Discourse analysis is useful because it attempts to explicitly link micro (e.g., subjectivity; individual behaviour) with macro processes (e.g., social organization; institutional arrangements). I aim to contribute to this research and thought through the notion of subject positions. There has been a surge of interest in this idea in discourse-oriented work, inspired by the work of Harre and Van Langenhove (e.g., 1999) and Ian Parker (e.g., 2002), and which has been used in therapy research (e.g., Guilfoyle, 2003; Winslade, 2005; Sutherland, 2007). But there is an alternative, politically rich formulation of the notion of subject positions, put forward by French philosopher Louis Althusser (1971/2008), which has been largely overlooked in studies of therapeutic practice. His formulation is distinct in that, while it is not discursive in its orientation, it does attend more explicitly and perhaps more *precisely*, to the micro-macro relation than the aforementioned more widely used understandings of subject positions. I will argue that Althusser's notion can be oriented towards and into discourse theory, from which point it has the potential to lend clarity to discourse-analytic studies of power in the therapeutic relationship, while simultaneously enabling hypotheses about the relationship between those local dynamics and societal power systems.

I begin with a brief overview of Althusser's notion of the subject, before examining a cognitive-behaviour therapy session.

ALTHUSSER'S ABSOLUTE SUBJECT

Althusser wrote in almost classical Marxist terms. I suggest, however, that a realignment of his work into a discourse-oriented approach enables us to enhance our vision and understanding of the subject as simultaneously a psychological and a political being. In order to appreciate this, let us briefly touch on his theoretical framework.

Althusserian interpellation

A focal point in Althusser's work was the Marxist notion of ideology, which he sought to refine beyond the blunted notion of 'false consciousness' typically associated with it. His thinking on this issue culminated in an essay entitled 'Ideology and ideological state apparatuses' (Althusser, 1971/2008), in which he proposed that the capitalist power system (the State) is sustained by the coordinated functioning of Repressive State Apparatuses (e.g., the police, the law, the army), which function by real or implied violence, and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), which function to promote and circulate ideology; ways of thinking *and doing* that promote the existing power system. These ISAs – including the church, the school, the family, the courts, the media – are 'on the side of the repressive state apparatus, but must not be confused with it' (Althusser, 1971/2008, 16). Their primary purpose is to recruit or *interpellate* the population, so that in our very thoughts, in our voluntary practices, we become willing participants in existing power operations.

Such recruitment occurs, says Althusser, via the ideologically supported existence of what he termed a 'Unique, Absolute, Other Subject' (Althusser, 1971/2008, 52). This 'big Subject'

is different from ordinary, common human subjects, in that it functions as a kind of law to which we submit; a principle to which we – ordinary human subjects – become *subject*. Through this Subject (distinguished from the ordinary ‘subject’ by the simple expedient of a capital ‘S’), we come to recognize ourselves and others, and construct values and norms to guide, evaluate and measure our conduct. But this is not merely a top-down, unidirectional process. Our subjection entails support for, and hence contributes to the stabilization of, a particular power formation. So, via our subjection, the big Subject is upheld, and so is the particular ISA for which it provides a ‘centre’, and to which it belongs. The example Althusser uses is of the ISA of Christianity, with God as the Absolute Subject, and Christians as the ordinary, common subjects. The significance of God – ideologically speaking – is that He ‘hails’ Christians, who not only recognize themselves but are also able to construct an entire world of thought and action (comprising self, God, Christians, ‘heathens’, and all others who can be known in this system) via the hailing process. As one recognizes that the hail – ‘Hey you!’ – is directed at oneself, one is said to have been interpellated by it, and hence into the ISA with which it is connected. Thus, as one is interpellated into Christianity around the central Absolute Subject of God (to follow Althusser’s example for a moment), one is able to categorize oneself and the world accordingly. The relationship between Absolute and ordinary subjects is not one of compliance but of mirroring. That is, one becomes subject to the Absolute Subject not so much by obeying it, but by internalizing it. One then speaks (for instance) as a Christian, in defence of God and all He stands for, not as if directed by God or some institutional oversight, but freely, out of a sense of self-determination, from within; ‘spontaneously’ (Hall, 1983, 64).

Why is Althusser’s theory important? Hall (1983) argued that the distinction between Absolute and ordinary subjects represents an elegant solution to the problem of understanding how people come to willingly participate in their own subjection; in systems of power that do not always operate to their advantage. Significantly, Hall argued that Althusser thereby ‘opened the gate to a more linguistic or discursive conception of ideology. It put on the agenda the whole neglected issue of how ideology becomes internalised’ (1983, 64). As we shall see, it enables an immediately accessible view of the person as both a psychological and a sociopolitical subject, simultaneously, in a way that is sometimes difficult to find in therapeutic formulations.

Some notion of the person’s recruitment into systems of power via self-knowledge or self-understanding (which is politically economical), rather than by coercion (which is not) allows us to understand the ‘directionality’ of peoples’ participation in these systems (Purvis and Hunt, 1993). We tend to act in ways that support – and do not significantly challenge – existing power arrangements; and we do this spontaneously or by ‘choice’. That there is what Purvis and Hunt (1993) refer to as an ideological directionality to our choices, is evidence not necessarily of our conscious political commitments but of our interpellation into – our subjection to – some broader system of power relations. This is the core of the Althusserian notion of interpellation: we act as we do because it seems right, natural or obvious; because we recognize ourselves as addressees of the ideological call sent out to us; and in so doing we inadvertently support existing power formations. For Althusser, this entails misrecognition of one’s political participation, and is central to how ideology works. Thus, when under the influence of an Absolute Subject – the law of God, of the economy, or, as we shall see, of rationality – our reading of situations is such that it seems just so

obvious how we should respond: 'Amen – So be it' (Althusser, 1971/2008, 55). We become conscripted – ideologically recruited – even as we feel, subjectively, that we are acting on the basis of free will or self-determination.

But there are problems with Althusser's theoretical system, which stem primarily from his Marxism and its simplified social space. Nevertheless, Purvis and Hunt (1993) have argued that, with some modification, Althusser's theory of the subject is eminently usable within a more complex theoretical universe than Marxism provides. The conceptual universe I am interested in here is that provided by the discursive formulations of Michel Foucault (e.g., 1982, 1990) and, more recently, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (see, for example, Laclau and Mouffe, 1985/2001; Torfing, 1999; Howarth, 2000) – for reasons to be elaborated below. I turn now to discuss Althusser's ideas in the context of discourse theory.

From Althusserian to discursive positioning

We can begin to appreciate the limitations of Althusser's formulation by considering the issue of resistance. In Althusser's system, there is little room for agency or resistance; for a refusal of the interpellation process. It seems that the good citizen submits whenever she or he is hailed. For Althusser, resistance – refusing interpellation – can only be met with some form of exclusion or reincorporation. For example, the insane and criminals are considered 'bad subjects' who provoke State intervention (Althusser, 1971/2008, 55), in the form of exclusion (e.g., prison or other institutions) or reincorporation (e.g., rehabilitation). For him, there is a single, coherent, tightly integrated, closed ideological system. In essence, there is only a single Absolute Subject centring a particular ISA, which in turn operates in a closed network of other ISAs and Repressive State Apparatuses. In that conceptual system, if one does not conform, one can be either 'mad or bad'. Room is not made for legitimate resistance. This critique of Althusser is often framed in the terms of his denial of 'agency'. However, to understand this difficulty (of docility) from a discursive perspective, we should begin not with the issue of agency, but multiplicity. That is, it is fruitless to object to Althusser's view of docile subjection on the grounds of a humanistic, *a priori* belief in human agency; rather, we should start by noting the *multiple interpellative options* facing human subjects at any time.

The idea of multiplicity is central in modern discourse theory (see Torfing, 1999). Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2001) have argued that the social sphere is constitutively divided and characterized by social antagonisms. This means that conflict, difference, contestation, are not in themselves problems to be solved, but essential features of democratic society, without which power ceases to flow and thereby becomes hypostatized. Social multiplicity is the inevitable result, which allows for fluidity in power dynamics. This is closely linked with Foucault's (e.g., 1980) distinction between domination, characterized by the arresting of power's movement and the impossibility of resistance, and power itself, which *requires* resistance for the continued unfolding of what Falzon has referred to as a 'dialogue of forces' (Falzon, 1998, 43). For Laclau, Mouffe and Foucault, it is multiplicity – difference, tension, antagonism – that ensures power's dynamism. It is therefore central to democratic process.

Already these notions of plurality and social antagonism considerably complicate Althusser's conceptual universe and lead to alternative possibilities. First, we can develop a rela-

tional rather than self-contained view of the Absolute Subject. Thus: Absolute Subject A (e.g., God; The Economy) can only exist alongside an alternative Absolute Subject B (e.g., Allah; The Environment), and then C, D, E, and so on. This relationality means that resistance does not necessarily make one a 'bad' or failed subject requiring repressive State intervention (as in Althusser's system), but could simply involve interpellation by and internalization of an alternative Absolute Subject. Intervention might be proposed or enacted (e.g., environmental discourse might persuade people to feel guilty over energy wastage) to effect ideological recruitment, but this is part of an ongoing cycle of power dynamics involving multiple competing Absolute Subjects (e.g., persuasive claims might be made that environmental science is being sensationalized, so one should not feel guilty). Secondly, instead of thinking of these Absolute Subjects as centring a particular ISA, as Althusser suggested, we can think of them – taking a lead from Purvis and Hunt (1993) and Hall (1983) – as functioning to centre a particular *discourse* in the context of a complex world in which different discourses are constantly organized and reorganized in and by power relations.

This idea of centring requires some elaboration. For Althusser, 'all ideology is centred...the Absolute Subject occupies the unique place of the Centre, and interpellates around it the infinity of individuals into subjects...such that it subjects the subjects to the Subject' (Althusser, 1971/2008, 55). In other words, the Absolute Subject holds the power system in place by gathering subjects around it and orchestrating their consciousness and activities in its name. This implies a closed system. But all versions of discourse theory hold that a system of power is never totally closed. A closed system would mean zero change and effectively an end to history (Falzon, 1998). This does not correspond with observed empirical changes in the world, in which it is evident that resistance is not only always possible, but essential to the occasional fracturing of power and to the production of new discourses and practices. This means, in relation to Althusser's Absolute Subject, that ideology can never be properly or successfully centred in the sense in which he meant it. Laclau and Mouffe's (e.g., 1985/2001) notion of a constitutively divided social space debunks any idea of a true ideological or discursive centre. There is no 'infinity of individuals' gathering around a centre but rather a divided, heterogeneous populace, who are at different times conscripted into different power formations, gathering often ambivalently around different discursive centres at different times.

Thus, in order to further reconstruct the Absolute Subject in discourse terms, it is necessary to distinguish between a centring function and the achievement of centeredness: An Absolute Subject might well serve a *centring function*, in the sense of serving to hold a discourse in place, and pulling subjects in to participate socially in particular ways, but it cannot empirically *achieve* such centeredness. As Laclau and Mouffe ([1985]/2001, 112) maintain: 'Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of difference, to construct a centre.' But the principle of multiplicity means that such centeredness can never be attained; it would catastrophically arrest the fluidity of sociocultural power dynamics.

So an Absolute Subject can be seen as a discursive centre; as the principle that organizes not only a discourse but also – as per Althusser – its (ideological) participants. But in a world of discursive multiplicity, we end up with a plethora of Absolute Subjects whose centring properties and antagonistic mutual relations function on the one hand to subject

humans to various – often incompatible – Subjects, and on the other hand to split them *between* different Subjects (i.e., making humans ultimately decentred). The ongoing and dynamic recruitment of subjects – a process undertaken by the Subject, which thereby requires and reproduces the ordinary subjects’ decentredness – becomes one of society’s most significant games of power.

These games can only end when subjects are fully discursively centred and meaningful resistance is either obliterated or comes universally to seem unreasonable or uncalled for. But for Foucault, Laclau and, perhaps most explicitly, Mouffe (e.g., 1993), there is an *ethical* injunction that the game *should* prevent the attainment of such a centre – the achievement of some final state of power arrangements – and keep enough difference in play in the system to prevent such closure. In other words, from a discursive perspective, the centre is a political danger that not only dissolves resistance and difference, but also agency. Althusser did not note these particular dangers but his notion of the Absolute Subject can help us to explore the centring motion of a power dynamic; such as that of the therapeutic encounter.

COGNITIVE-BEHAVIOUR THERAPY (CBT)

Hundreds of named therapies exist today (Holmes, 2005, suggests in excess of 400), and we should not consider ‘therapy’ to be a singular bloc of coordinated activities. Different therapies attempt to do different things, and demonstrate varying attitudes regarding how or whether (as if this were a possibility) the therapist role should involve participation in extra-therapeutic systems of power dynamics. But these differences seem to have been subsumed under a pragmatic imperative for apparently scientifically validated therapies. The dominant contemporary trend is for standardized therapies, which are amenable to manualization, short term in nature, focus on problem alleviation, framed in the language of psychiatric diagnostic systems, and which meet the time/cost stipulations of insurance companies and other institutions. In this context, CBT has emerged as the Western world’s ‘therapy of choice’ (Guilfoyle, 2008, 197) and is often referred to as ‘the single most important’ therapeutic approach (Salkovskis, 1996, xiii). It has become popular in professional circles but the media has helped CBT and some of its terms to become increasingly part of common sense vernacular. With its increasing hegemonization of the therapeutic landscape, which is thereby threatened with precisely the sort of non-democratic centring that Laclau and Mouffe warn against, it becomes important that we understand how *in-session* CBT practices relate to societal power arrangements.

Althusser’s theory allows us to pose the question: ‘what forms of interpellation can be noted in the practice of CBT?’ A modified form of Althusser’s ideas (as discussed above) allows us to study the dynamic operation of Absolute Subjects in CBT sessions, and to generate hypotheses about what kinds of discursive positions, and hence political roles, clients and therapists are called upon to occupy; how they are ideologically ‘hailed’ in and via therapeutic practice.

The session to be discussed is a textbook example presented by Beck (1995). The client is a 40-year-old woman who is in therapy because she feels depressed, hopeless and has suicidal ideas. Her primary concern is the break up of her relationship with her boyfriend (he left her), leaving her emotionally devastated. A theme running through her account in

this session is that of needing to find another man, although as we shall see she occupies different positions at different times during the interview.

In a therapeutic dialogue multiple discourses are invoked and thus multiple subject positioning options are likely made available for participants. For instance, therapist and client are institutionally positioned very differently from each other, and they are also in some respects pre-positioned relative to each other in culturally constructed ways (e.g., as expert and non-expert; knower and known) (Guilfoyle, 2006). Furthermore, self- and other-positionings pertaining to race, gender, culture, citizenship, social class, appearance, and so on, are all constantly and often invisibly performed in social interactions. Thus, the discourses and the Absolute and ordinary subject positions I will discuss below should be seen in the context of a complex flux and flow of discursive activity, and not as the sole contributors to the participants' actions and/or subjectivity.

The rational Absolute Subject

It is possible to discern in the session what we might consider to be a prevailing – though never totalizing; never totally successfully installed – Absolute Subject, which functions to organize the activity of the participants. This figure, whose features I will attempt to articulate by tracing the talk, is represented by the therapist in the content of his speech, in his overt adherence to a particular therapeutic approach, and is to some degree embodied by him.

Consider the following interaction, which takes place early on in the session:

Extract 1

Client: I don't want to, but I feel driven [to find a man]. I don't know why I keep fighting that, but I do. I'm not involved with anybody now and I don't want to be, but I feel a compulsion.

...3 turns later)

Therapist: Now, you have an opportunity to not have to be dependent on another guy, but you have to pay a price. There's pain now for gain later. Now are you willing to pay the price?

Client: I'm afraid that if I don't involve myself with somebody right away ... I know that's dichotomous thinking... I think if I don't get immediately involved, that I will never have anybody.

Therapist: That's all or nothing thinking.

Client: I know.

Therapist: That's all or nothing thinking. Now, if you are going to do it on the basis of all or nothing thinking, that's not very sensible. If you are going to do it on the basis of 'The pain is so great that I just don't want to stick it out anymore', all right. Then you take your aspirin temporarily and you'll just have to work it out at a later date. The thing is – do you want to stick it out right now? ...

Client: I don't know ... Theoretically, I know I could prove to myself that I could, in fact, be happy without a man, so that if I were to have a relationship with a man in the future, I would go into it not feeling desperate, and I would probably eliminate a lot of anxiety and depression that have in the past been connected to this relationship. (Beck, 1995, 124–5)

The question to be posed of the text here, as we aim to identify the operation of some Absolute Subject, is something like: ‘according to what law or principle does the therapist invite the client to understand herself and her actions?’ Or, ‘as what kind of figure is the client being hailed?’

Let us summarize the therapist’s statements in the extract. He advocates ‘pain now for gain later’ and warns against what CBT practitioners refer to as ‘cognitive distortions’ (all-or-nothing thinking or dichotomous thinking). He counsels only giving in to emotional pain on rational, ‘sensible’ grounds – not on the basis of cognitive distortions – and demonstrates his preference for ‘sticking it out’ (i.e., not seeking a man and thereby giving in to the emotional pain). In other words, the therapist suggests the instalment of a kind of internal hierarchy, in which disciplined thought processes enable domination over felt emotional needs. Thus, the client should delay gratification under the rules of ‘sensibility’, or undistorted, logical, rational thought processes. Indeed, at numerous points through the session the therapist refers to the value of being ‘rational’; an idea which is not only central to the CBT approach but is also eminently culturally recognizable and valued. It seems reasonable, therefore, to suggest that the therapist proposes a law of rationality.

Such a ‘law’ may work most powerfully when it is somehow embodied. We can imagine it more fully, and apply it to ourselves more easily, if we can imagine some figure who represents this law. There is no shortage of representative figures of rationality in the broader culture (e.g., scientists). Let us call these figures embodiments of the rational Subject. At times in this particular session it is clear that the therapist both positions himself and is positioned by the client as such a rational Subject. Of course, this kind of positioning must always to some extent be a fantasy. It is a caricature, which glosses over those aspects of the therapist (or whomever embodies this law), which demonstrates disorganization, mess, emotionality, irrationality or ‘error’.

Thus, the law of rationality might work best if it seems that it could be ‘filled out’ or represented by a human being. I suggest that the hailing power of the Absolute Subject (in this case, of rationality) lies not only in the therapist’s presentation and representation of rationality as an idea but in the hailing of the client by a future and perhaps somewhat idealized image of herself. In other words, the question is not ‘can she see the rationality that the therapist advertises to her?’, but ‘to what extent can she imagine herself occupying a subject position of rationality?’ Methodologically then, it might be useful to think not merely of a law of rationality but of a *rational figure* serving as the Absolute Subject in the therapist’s talk and presentation; an idea of a person that the client can come to identify with. This totally rational figure is presented, both in this session and in the CBT literature, as the epitome of the mentally healthy human being.

It is significant – and indeed, to be expected – that the client already recognizes this figure. The therapist does not need to teach her ‘who it is’ (although much of the therapy seems to be about ‘how to become it’). At another point in the session (see extract 2 below) the therapist reminds the client that she had herself already noted that ‘reason’ was her ‘greatest ally’. According to Althusser (1971/2008), it is the ‘obviousness’ of such a principle (as rationality) that gives it so powerful an interpellative force. It is hardly contentious – it is in Althusser’s terms, ‘obvious’ – for Western enculturated persons to consider ‘rationality’ an ally; as a corrective against the culturally devalued characteristics of ‘emotionality’ or ‘irrationality’. Thus, the Absolute Subject proposed by the thera-

pist here, and in CBT more generally, is one that is both culturally recognized and valued.

This rational figure is presented as Absolute Subject even when the client is in extreme emotional turmoil. Consider, for example, the following interchange. The client has just spoken about feeling closer to suicide than before.

Extract 2

Therapist: Perhaps we should talk about that a little bit because we haven't talked about the advantages and disadvantages of killing yourself.

Client: You make everything so logical.

Therapist: Is that bad? Remember you once wrote something... that reason is your greatest ally. Have you become allergic to reason?... Does it take an effort to be reasonable?

Client: I know I am being unreasonable; the thoughts seem real to me... that it does take an effort to try and change them. (Beck, 1995, 121)

The therapist's talk through this brief extract is suffused with the obviousness of the value of logic, reason and rationality. Even in the case of suicidal intention, the therapist once more focuses the client's attention on the standards and norms of the absolutely rational Subject. And as subject of this Subject – as one who 'should' identify with its norms and values – she should consider, he says, 'the advantages and disadvantages' of suicide. This suggestion's connection with the culturally and therapeutically valued law of rationality – with the socially constructed supremely rational figure – is affirmed by the client's response: 'You make everything seem so logical.' In other words, she not only recognizes the law of rationality itself, or the ideally rational figure, but notices – via observation of and interaction with the therapist – that it could potentially be applied to 'everything'. Indeed, in the final turn of extract 2, she demonstrates at least some nominal identification with or subjection to it: 'I know I am being unreasonable'. After all, she can only call herself 'unreasonable' to the extent that she has in some way become subject to, and measures herself by the standards of, the absolutely rational/ reasonable Subject.

At these points – as well as when she alludes to her own cognitive distortions in extract 1 – it seems that she has been somewhat successfully hailed by this culturally recognizable rational Subject; she has been interpellated by it. Thus, she is able to construct her suicidal feelings as well as her pressing need for a man as failures of rationality. That is, she not only recognizes the rational Absolute Subject, but in a sense, *it recognizes her*. This is the interpellative moment, where she situates the Subject inside of herself – she both recognizes herself in its call, and thereby recognizes the Subject as a constitutive feature of her own consciousness or subjectivity – from which point it can most effectively inform or guide her experience. Thus, she feels that she is failing *her own* standards of rationality; not merely the standards suggested by the therapist or of some external, culturally produced Absolute Subject. So, when I say 'it recognizes her', I mean that the norms, standards, values and behavioural guidelines of the culturally available rational Subject seem to speak so eloquently of her and to her. It is capable – for example, through the therapist – of

thoroughly accounting for her misery and her happiness; indeed, it seems to explain ‘everything’ about her. She internalizes it at a psychological level, just as she has been interpellated by it at a cultural level. Her internalization of the rational Subject coincides with her subjection to it. As the therapist says later on: ‘I can’t make you strong and independent... I can show you the way, but if you do it, you haven’t done it by taking anything from me; you’ve done it by drawing on resources within yourself’ (Beck, 1995, 133). The client accepts this, and seems to move towards making sense of herself in this way. Her internalization of the culturally valued rational Subject figure allows her to assess herself in the terms of its standards of conduct. And these standards are now experienced as her own.

Resisting and exceeding the rational Subject

As already discussed, the antagonism that constitutes sociality ensures that any Absolute Subject must contend with numerous other Absolute Subjects, or exemplars of alternative discursive formations. Such alternatives are indeed evident in this case.

Throughout the session, and indeed, in the very request for therapy, the client demonstrates both resistance to, and a kind of excess over, the rational Subject privileged in CBT discourse. The most pervasive resistance to this comes in what – for the rational Subject – is the very core of her difficulties: her need to be in a relationship with a man. She expresses this directly on numerous occasions.

Extract 3

Client: I feel desperate. I feel that I have to find somebody right now – right away [p. 124]... I think if I don’t get immediately involved, that I will never have anybody [p. 125]... I feel so bad (when not distracted and thinking about being single)... That’s when I think I want to die [p. 129]... I feel stronger when I have a man [p. 133].

These comments – drawn from various stages in the session – reflect the client’s subjection to a very different sort of figure than the rational Subject. This alternative identification goes some way in accounting for the amount of work required – both interpersonal and intrapsychic – to enable identification with and willing subjection to the rational Subject. It was never the case – in the session – that she did not recognize the more therapeutically favoured rational Subject. But this does not prevent her from having identified more fully with a different kind of Absolute Subject. I suggest that this is not precisely a dependent Subject – although that is what her words might indicate to us – but rather an intimately attached woman Subject. She speaks of this as ‘the Real Me’ (Beck, 1995, 121). This distinction between dependency and intimate attachment is important. It seems reasonable to suggest that our client has not set herself the goal of attaining dependency, but, precisely, heterosexual attachment or belonging, without – perhaps – being aware of the gender power dynamics that are so closely associated with it. Dependency might be an effect of the absolute valuation of intimate attachment, and it might be a psychologist’s interpretation of her conduct, but I do not think it (i.e., dependency) can be seen as the cultural law to which she has become subject.

This attached figure is an eminently culturally available Subject, in relation to whom the client is able to find self-recognition, and through whom she makes sense of those around

her (e.g., the happily attached versus the overtly or covertly miserably unattached) and constructs her experiences. It is a way of constructing her belonging in the world, and it thereby offers a kind of discursive homing or containment. The loss of her relationship is indicative of a distressing distancing from this figure; of the loss of her (preferred) position in the overarching discourse. To the extent that she has internalized this figure, the relationship break up is experienced as a rupture in herself. She can no longer be who she feels she is, or at least, should be. Furthermore, her place in a culture that places considerable value on gender patterned intimate attachments is in jeopardy. It is especially difficult for her to story her life meaningfully when she is positioned as an unattached, failed, lonely subject, which given her circumstances is the inevitable current form of her subjection to the intimately attached woman figure she is (apparently) 'meant to be'. In this discourse, one's inability to come close to fulfilling this Subject's requirements means a failure to be oneself, as well as isolation, and sometimes literally, death (or suicide).

This Subject is also – like the rational Subject – recognizable to enculturated Western individuals. It ushers in a number of discursive practices, some of which involve relational divisions on the basis of gender and power inequalities (e.g., a woman's dependency on a man). It seems that gender-power issues may play a very significant role in the client's presentation. And yet the rational Subject does not make much room for serious engagement with these issues. From the perspective of that rational Subject, the client's search for a man is interpreted not as her participation in societal gender dynamics, or in terms of her internalization of certain gendered positions, but simply as negative thinking or cognitive distortions. From the perspective of rationality, as articulated by the therapist, one merely lets oneself off the hook by attributing one's difficulties to social or cultural issues:

Extract 4

Therapist: ... if you see yourself as just being victimised by these forces you have no control over ... you're just helpless in terms of the internal and external things ... And you are the only person who can do it [remedy her helplessness] ... I can't make you strong and independent ... I can show you the way, but if you do it, you haven't done it by taking anything from me; you've done it by drawing on resources within yourself. (Beck, 1995, 133)

The cultural 'obviousness' of these comments makes them very hard to challenge (particularly if one is a client relating to a powerful therapist). Of course, it is obvious that the therapist cannot 'make' her 'strong and independent'; she can only do so herself, drawing on her own internal resources. The obviousness of this stance belies its disavowal of the social and cultural forces associated with her positioning. Of course, this approach might be helpful, especially in the short term, but it glosses over the question of why she has become subject to the figure of the intimately attached woman, except to interpret such subjection as a distortion in her cognitive processing: an error. This interpretation conceals the process of interpellation and renders invisible the social forces (concerning gender and power, for example) that may have conspired to recruit her. She is made to seem irrational when it seems more likely that she has quite reasonably and realistically appraised aspects of the dominant sociocultural situation.

As the session progresses the interpellative power of the rational Subject begins to eclipse that of the intimately attached Subject. And so the gendered identification processes that

appear to have taken place are rendered increasingly invisible. The problem here is not, the subjectifying rational Subject insists, that women are socialized into thinking this way (i.e., that her problem is that she has not found the right man) about themselves and relationships; although the therapist guesses that her beliefs 'were very deeply implanted at a very young age' (Beck, 1995, 127). It is rather that *this client* is under the influence of cognitive distortions. If that is the problem, then the solution is not to question the ways in which women – and this woman in particular – become vulnerable to certain identifications but simply to help the client think more rationally.

The client's interpellation into this position of valuing and relying on reason and rationality as the appropriate tools for constructing attitudes and actions is clearly displayed in the following extract, which occurs in the last third of the session. The client is speaking about a particularly distressing 'thought' – that her misery will never end – and about how she dealt with it.

Extract 5

Client: (Cheerful) Can I tell you something very positive I did this morning?

Therapist: (Kidding) No, I hate to hear positive things. I'm allergic. Okay. I'll tolerate it. (Laughs)

Client: (Recalls rational self instruction) I got that thought before I was even awake, and I said, 'Will you stop it, just give yourself a chance and stop telling yourself things like that' ... I thought that was a very positive thing to do. (Laughs)

Therapist: That's terrific. Well, say it again so I can remember.

Client: I said, 'Stop it and give yourself a chance.' (Beck, 1995, 131)

The therapist's joking 'allergy' reference seems to reinforce the power of the 'positive' (i.e., rational) Subject. It is clear in the session, as it is in cognitive-behavioural theory generally, that 'positive' is likely to mean 'rational'. Indeed, in this extract we see that the therapist refers to the client's 'positive' actions as 'rational self-instruction'. His playful sarcasm suggests that being averse to rationality is the most ridiculous thing in the world.

This is the power of the Absolute Subject in Althusser's formulation; its truths are so obvious that to deny them seems outrageous, ridiculous, or obscene. Here, the therapist suggests in paradoxical fashion that positive (i.e., rational) things are so important as to be beyond question. It is as if he is saying 'Do you even need to ask? Is it not so obvious that we should delight in your positive/rational actions?' This cultural obviousness surely powerfully aids the client's move towards – and her increasing demonstration of – interpellation by the rational Subject position. In the culturally valued discourse of rationality, this is constructed as the natural direction of growth: from irrational to rational; from negative to positive. The therapist does not have to model, represent or stand in for Absolute rational Subject any longer because the client is more fully and consciously performing as a subject of and subject to that Subject.

The client's pride at successfully stopping her negative thoughts (a CBT strategy) highlights her internalization of the rational Subject and *its* interpretation of her experience. She

has, as already noted, become subject to this Subject. (Of course, this does not involve total capture; there will always be excess and perhaps moments of resistance to it, although these are easily then interpretable as yet more irrationality.) Althusser's distinctions enable us to highlight that our client's proud use of this rational strategy functions not only to reconcile or unite – or, in therapeutic parlance, 'heal' – the divisions within herself but also to install her more firmly into one societal power formation rather than another. For example, the internal conflict between the notion, 'I need a man to be happy' and the notion, 'I need to be more rational', relates to a broader struggle over the visibility of social power dynamics. The latter strategy – to be rational – obscures the social realities that support the former idea (e.g., in the form of gender politics and the dynamics of heterosexism); while the former strategy – as Beck (1995) notes – seems to undermine personal agency. Thus, these two positions have their own Absolute Subject positions, which construct the client's experience in radically different ways and each of which moves to install the client in different positions, psychologically, socially and politically. Her eventual identification with the rational Subject position involves reinterpretation of the alternative positioning (i.e., which becomes an irrational thought rather than a culturally valued idea) and she comes closer to a particular kind of psychological and social centre, provided by that rational Subject. The discursive conflict that has pervaded the session, both psychologically and interpersonally, has been temporarily resolved via the hegemonization of the discourse of heterosexual intimacy (and its attached woman Subject) by the discourse of rationality (and its rational Subject).

This amounts to a discursive re-situation of the person, such that subject positions are occupied, which render salient issues of personal agency and self-determination, while de-legitimizing – by labelling as producing helplessness (extract 4) – participation in certain sociocultural power relations. In the process, the rationally based CBT therapeutic intervention seems to simplify and temporarily unify the social space and as far as possible to remove traces of social power and antagonistic forces by reinterpreting difference as 'irrational'. As it does so, this intervention also moves to simplify and unify the client's psychological space, as she begins to interpret more and more of her experience in terms of the law or principle of rationality.

For the therapist, all of this means that therapy has been successful. The client's recognition of herself in and through the rational Subject has given her some sense of hope, and she is no longer suicidal, for example. But for the discourse analyst, this therapeutic success and the psychological unifications that seem to have been produced may be associated with important social and political reconfigurations. It seems that therapeutic change has been achieved to some degree via the client's recruitment into a power formation that functions to deny and conceal its own and its subjects' participation in societal games of power (e.g., by elevating the power of rationality and self-determination over the hailing power of other cultural practices).

CONCLUSIONS

Althusser's subject–Absolute Subject distinction allows us to examine therapy as a field upon which a much broader set of social antagonisms and power relations is played out. In this case, it seems that we have on the one hand the culturally recognizable and valued rational Subject who denies or sets aside the reality of social conditions, distracting our

attention away from that domain and the conflicts that constitute it; and on the other hand we have the equally recognizable intimately attached woman Subject, which alerts us to culturally promoted values and the power of gender socialization. If therapy predisposes – as I think it often does – towards a simplification of both social and psychological spaces, then we should ask ourselves various questions: What kind of hailing processes accompany ‘successful’ therapy? Which Absolute Subject captures the client and persuades her to reinterpret her actions in its own terms? What ‘obviousnesses’ are activated to make recruitment seem necessary? What discourses and power formations are supported, or challenged, in the process? And to what extent are these power formations rendered invisible and hence difficult to challenge?

In the session discussed, the force of the rational Subject was such that the alternative was gradually muted (though not silenced completely) and rendered ‘irrational’. Its capacity to raise for attention the question of gender power dynamics was thereby lost, and constitutive social antagonisms – the ongoing conflict between discourses, subject positions and Absolute Subjects that Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2001) maintain make up democratic society and infiltrate local, micro relations – are obscured from view as they are reconstructed in terms of the unitary dimension of rationality-irrationality. Such examination of the interpellative dynamics taking place in therapy allows us to more clearly question therapy’s role in the recruitment of subjects to participate in directional ways in the production and reproduction of societal power relations.

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