

Psychotherapy, Politics and the “Common Factor” of Power

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ABSTRACT *This article introduces a new Associate Editor. It discusses politics and, specifically, power as a common factor in psychotherapy. Copyright © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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In writing this impressionistic contribution to the theme of this journal’s title, psychotherapy and politics, I find myself wanting to write, very selectively and partially, about *power*. One of the arguable shortcomings of the psychological therapies field is that, with some very notable and honourable exceptions (e.g., Embleton Tudor & Tudor, 1994; Guggenbühl-Craig, 1998; Guilfoyle, 2008; Hook, 2002, 2007; Lerner, 1999; Lomas, 1987; Proctor, 2002; Smail, 2005; Totton, 2006), the question of power has not remotely been engaged with as widely or as deeply as it surely needs to be (House, 2008). As Foucault (2002) helped us to understand, power is everywhere, whether it be overtly and more formally exercised, as in institutional politics, or less tangibly, through its diverse and richly textured exercising in all human relational situations. So, in this brief contribution, I want to speak of “politics” in a broad rather than in a narrower sense – for everything, including “the personal”, is in some sense *necessarily* political (Embleton Tudor and Tudor, 1994, p. 385). From this it follows that therapists cannot but engage with “politics” in this more general sense, simply by virtue of the kind of human relational work we choose to do. In this spirit, the great R. D. Laing himself came up with a book title that resounds across the decades, that is, *The Politics of Experience* (Laing, 1967, my emphasis).

I would like to pose a number of questions about power, which I think any serious engagement between therapy and politics must surely address, and which I will leave for reflection:

- Is it either legitimate or useful to try to define “power” in any meaningful, operational way – and to specify how it plays out within relationships or, indeed, how it constitutes helping relationships?
- Do the different therapy modalities have different conceptions of power, and, if so, what effect might such differences have on therapy practice? (See, for example, Proctor, 2008).
- What is the relationship between power and professionalism, and in what sense, if any, is it appropriate to conceive of therapeutic practice as “a profession” in the conventional sense of that term?

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- Might therapy itself, as an activity, entail a Foucauldian “regime of truth” (cf. Rose’s work; e.g., Rose, 2003) that risks stifling rather than enabling the creative transformative experience that occurs in a therapy experience at its best? (See also House, 2003)
- What might be the power implications of understanding therapy as a clinical practice and an historically specific cultural phenomenon which serves a “disciplinary” and “governmentality” function (Foucault, 1991) via “regimes of the self” (Rose, 1996, 2003) in late-modern societies?

Drawing strongly on Foucault’s work, I find the idea of *fearlessly speaking professional truth to political power* to be an especially useful way of thinking about aspects of therapy work. Foucault gave a series of lectures on “*parrhesia*”, the Greek notion of fearless speech or the “telling of the unvarnished truth”. The book *Fearless Speech* (Foucault, 2001) comprises transcriptions (from audio tapes) of six lectures delivered by Foucault at the University of California, Berkeley, in October and November 1983. “*parrhesia*” describes the speech of someone who has the moral qualities to speak the truth, even if it defies conventional viewpoints or is otherwise dangerous. For Foucault, “*parrhesia*” possessed five features: *frankness*, an expression of the speaker’s own opinion; *truth*, i.e., saying what one has in mind without qualification; *danger*, which acknowledges that there is some risk entailed in telling the truth; *criticism*, which describes the source of the risk, conveyed through penetrating insight; and finally, that “*parrhesia*” should be considered a social *duty* – and a right (Burke, 2003). Foucault also examined the place of “*parrhesia*” in democratic institutions and, ultimately, both its practices and its games. “*Parrhesia*” is a type of speech that mandates its own telling, with the *parrhesiastes*, or truth-teller, being one who puts himself or herself at considerable risk, including the risk of death. *Parrhesia* can, therefore, be seen as an essential prerequisite for critical theory and criticism. In a review of *Fearless Speech*, Dongieux (2002) wrote: “After reading [the book], I was frankly amazed that the idea is not more widely discussed in university rhetoric classes. The concept is extremely fruitful, first of all, for anyone interested in rhetoric, dialectic [sic], philosophy, and law.”

Foucault showed all of us that “*parrhesia*” needs to be incorporated into our everyday modes of thinking and speaking which, in turn, leads us to the inevitable postmodern question: to what extent are “we” speaking as subjects, and to what extent is ideology “speaking” us? Dongieux (2002) again: “What power does our speech reproduce, and what might it transform?” and, especially relevant for psychotherapy, “Is our speech emancipatory? Does it contribute to the complexity of thought? Does it leave more questions open than closed? Do we break new ground, or just re-hash the useless play of words?” This left me thinking about the important critical psychological work of Derek Hook (e.g., Hook, 2007; House, 2011), and also the recent book by Eagleton and Beaumont (2009), *The Task of the Critic*. Brian Thorne, an international authority on the person-centred approach, once wrote that therapy is an intrinsically *subversive*, critical activity, rather than a conservative one. Put somewhat differently, counselling and psychotherapy have historically been conducted in a private, confidential space, free of externally defined, institutionally driven agendas. Such a therapeutic space is arguably one of late-modern society’s last surviving bastions against, and refuges from, narrowly stultifying mechanistic thinking, and from the intrusive compliance experiences that bring many, if not most, clients into therapy in the first place. On this view, there is an urgent need to protect the free, unregulated consulting room experience from standardising, normalising ideologies of all kinds – including therapeutic ones.

For Mowbray (1995), “human potential” work (which he vigorously distinguished from medical-model “psychotherapy”), is a practice that:

must stay on the margin and not be “absorbed”, not be tempted by the carrots of recognition, respectability and financial security into reverting to the mainstream, but rather remain – on the “fringe” – as a source that stimulates, challenges convention and “draws out” the unrealized potential for “being” in the members of that society. (pp. 198–199)

Mowbray continued:

A society needs a healthy fringe – a fringe that is on the edge but not split-off in cult-like isolation. It is the seedbed from which much of what is novel will spring. It is where ideas that are ahead of their time will germinate and grow, later to be adopted by the mainstream. In order to remain a fertile seedbed, the fringe needs to be legitimate rather than driven underground or “criminalized” – which would stifle it, but also it must not be absorbed into the mainstream – which would stultify it with “establishment” thinking and respectability . . . the possibility of . . . statutory endorsement poses a threat to the vitality of the “fringe”. (pp. 199–200)

The late, lamented renegade Jungian, James Hillman, also had much to say about power (see Hillman, 1997). For Hillman, no one definition of power was adequate, and he showed us how power is multifaceted and permeates our daily lives, influencing our behaviour and our choices. Further, if we think of power in a narrow modernist way as primarily about “force”, we can easily miss its more subtle uses and manifestations, e.g., as influence, authority or energy. Hillman, then, spoke of a far broader experience of power that is rooted in body–mind and emotions, in contrast to more conventionally narrow viewpoints which simplistically equate power with strength. Hillman also argued that we can easily miss the possibility that problems around power may have many and richly varied solutions. There are also many ways of examining power, together with how its various meanings influence or even govern how we see and experience the world, a perspective which has echoes of Foucault. Characteristically, Hillman drew upon mythology for insights into the psychology of power and, in the process, takes us on a journey that offers many freeing insights.

Like Foucault, Hillman did not judge certain kinds of power as being good or bad; rather he strove to view each of the many kinds of power that he identified in a new light. If we are to become more effective – and, of course, this applies quintessentially to therapists – Hillman maintained that we must become aware of how we think about power. Here we might perhaps start to see a new way of engaging with what we might call “the *relational politics* of psychotherapy” (cf. Hook, 2007) and, as Hillman (1997) has it, empowerment emerges through understanding the widest range of possibilities for embracing power.

For me, power, however we might strive to understand it, is at the centre of both politics and psychotherapeutic practice; and it might even be that the very striving to understand the relational dynamics of power is what constitutes the work of therapy itself: a kind of “laboratory” of human relational experience in which “therapist” and “client” are engaged *co-researchers* (Heron, 1996).

As a new associate editor of this excellent journal, I would be delighted to see in its pages a concerted engagement with power in all its manifestations – for until we can come to a more mature, fearless, relatively undefended understanding of what power consists in, it is very difficult to see how either therapy practice or political activity can move forward, and be anything other than status-quo reinforcing practices. If therapy is indeed to be an intrinsically subversive activity, the last thing it should be is an apology for the status quo – whether we are speaking socio-economically, psychotherapeutically, ecologically or paradigmatically.

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