

THE DYNAMICS OF POWER IN COUNSELLING AND PSYCHOTHERAPY: ETHICS, POLITICS AND PRACTICE

Gillian Proctor

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In the preface the author states that this book is for everyone who has an interest in, or experience of, therapy or counselling. Gillian Proctor's aim is to provide a theoretical framework for the analysis of the complex issues surrounding power in our field. She achieves this aim by scrutinising power dynamics in the therapy relationship drawing on both her impressively extensive research and her personal experience as both practitioner and client. Half the chapters consist of informative overviews, for example, "the context of therapy today"; the other half pose provocative questions, such as: "Why does power in therapy matter?", "Isn't therapy always dangerous or abusive?", "How does power work?", and "Conclusions: what can we do about power?". Proctor explores in depth in Chapters 5, 7, and 8 the play of power in cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), person-centred therapy, and the psychodynamic approach respectively. In the latter chapter one aspect of her analysis is as a client of a psychodynamic therapist.

I can't praise this book highly enough. What struck me early in reading it is Proctor's deeply empathic position and her quiet yet incisive passion to right wrongs in our trade (or profession, if you prefer). To me, this addressing of injustice is embedded in the skeleton of the book rather than in polemics. She gets to the heart of what she is saying and writes with a consistent and skilful implicit awareness of the client that I have rarely come across in counselling or psychotherapy tomes. And this is a tome, in the best sense of the word—despite its deceptively slimish size. But nowhere does it become dry, dull, and overtechnical; on the contrary, it kept me on my toes with its tight, incisive argument.

This is an eminently readable book. It is organised into bite-sized sections, with summaries at the end of each chapter. Some chapters are more academic than others, as Proctor points out, but she endeavours to make her analysis accessible to as many readers as possible. It is a book of incredible breadth, bringing together the work of therapists and thinkers from Rogers, Hobbes, and Machiavelli to Foucault, Ferenczi, Masson, and Bion, to name but a few, with considerable depth of analysis. I hope this book is required reading for trainees on counselling and psychotherapy training courses across the UK; the summary of themes in the conclusion would provide excellent essay/discussion material.

Chapter Two is superb. Proctor unpicks, stitch by stitch, the question, "Isn't therapy always dangerous or abusive?" This chapter is invaluable for beginner and seasoned practitioner alike. I found myself taking deep breaths, reminded afresh of the complexity of power dynamics, helped by her very clear analysis of the different facets of power, one example she gives being the differences in role power, societal power, historical power and the great mistake we make if we forget or get complacent about the power we have in our work as therapists and ways in which that can be misused, intentionally or inadvertently.

In reading her analysis of Foucault in Chapter Four, "How does power work? Post-structural theories," I found myself wishing that Proctor had been my sociology lecturer all those years ago, when I studied Foucault as an undergraduate. Her analysis and summary of his work helped me see much more clearly how his thoughts can be usefully applied in reflecting therapy practice. Likewise, in Chapter Seven, my knowledge of person-centred therapy deepened through her thoughtful analysis.

In Chapter Five, “Cognitive behaviour therapy: The obscuring of power in the name of science,” I found that Proctor put words and structure to my personal misgivings about CBT. It helped make sense of my experience of completing a diploma in CBT—one of those episodes when my curiosity led me down a metaphorical cul-de-sac! She points out, and gives examples of, the confusion between compliance and collaboration which is often found in the theory and practice of CBT, discussing this at length in this chapter. She also notes how little attention is paid to the issue of power in most literature on CBT, along with how very little mention there is of the pitfalls and dangers of the therapist deciding what is in the best interests of the client. Proctor's overview of the “Improving Access to Psychological Therapies Programme” (IAPT) in Chapter Six, “The context of therapy today,” provides an excellent overview for anyone who does not work in the National Health Service in the UK.

My only criticism of this book is that I wished, at times, there were more examples, as I found these illuminating in fully making sense of her tightly-knit argument. I particularly appreciated her courage and congruence in Chapter Eight, “The psychodynamic approach: Isn't the power all in the transference?”, where she intersperses theory with her own experience of psychodynamic therapy between the ages of 24 and 28, and then of revisiting the therapist 20 years later. I found this chapter fascinating but rather long—for me, it rather broke up the rhythm of the book. Having said that, there was nothing I would want to see omitted from the chapter. I wondered whether there might have been a way of splitting the chapter in two, allowing a “coming up for air” in the middle of a particularly dense, rich, and courageous piece of writing.

I also found this book very helpful on a personal level. When I was reading the second half I was in the midst of reflecting on being on the receiving end of some particularly unpleasant power-play in a personal interaction. Reading this book gave me clarity and perspective in figuring out what had happened and possibly why.

Proctor achieves something few authors do; she offers a digested, intelligent, concise, compelling account of the dynamics of power, which will be accessible to many readers and has an extensive bibliography. She achieves her intention of delivering it to an audience comprising everyone interested in counselling and psychotherapy. It's the most informative therapy book I've read in a while—on theory and practice. I know that it is a book which I will return to again and again, in reflecting on my role as therapist, facilitator, supervisor, and flawed human. Part way through reading this book, taking notes, I wrote that Proctor's book is a “power house of eruditeness!” That still rang true by the time I finished it.

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