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Counsellors in the gaze: A Foucauldian analysis
of counsellors stories around being a counsellor

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Abstract

Over recent years there has been an increase in the number of rules and regulations pertaining to counselling in New Zealand. This project looks at the power relations constituted in those changes for a small group of counsellors. The social constructionist perspective is evaluated and found to provide a useful epistemological basis for this inquiry, when used in combination with a critical realist epistemology. This epistemological duality allows the objects under discussion to have different types of ontological status ranging from the socially constructed to the (more or less) real. An overview of the different styles of narrative analysis is presented and the conclusion reached that structural models of identifying and analysing narrative are not appropriate for working with fragmentary narratives. A model is presented for identification and analysis of fragmentary narratives based on content.

Three narratives about being a counsellor are identified; the 'counsellor as double agent', the 'unsupported counsellor' and the 'unyielding counsellor'. The story of the counsellor as double agent is the story of a counsellor who may promote either training or relationship as having primary importance, depending on context. The story of the unsupported counsellor is the story about the lack of support of the relationship aspect of counselling outside of peer circles. The story of the unyielding counsellor is the story of the counsellor who would leave rather than compromise her values. These three narratives are presented as being co-existent. Through analysis of these narratives the type of control practise constituted in the new rules and regulations is identified as being a type of 'sovereign' or overt power practise. This characterisation of that power practise lends validity to subsequent discussions about resistance to the cultural change constituted in the new requirements. The power practices operating prior to the recent changes are identified as being 'disciplinary' or covert in nature. The conclusion is reached that the 'counsellor' represented by the text under analysis is not necessarily operating under normative regimes, and may at times adopt a deconstructive approach to the processes underlying construction of behaviour as 'problem'.

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Introduction

As a counsellor in private practice in New Zealand I am interested in changes that are happening in the counselling industry in this country. It has been my experience that over the last five to ten years there has been a profound change in the form of an increase in the number and specificity of the regulations and other formalised requirements which employers, ethical bodies, registration authorities and funding agencies may now use to scrutinise counselling and counsellors.

In recent years the New Zealand Association of Counsellors (NZAC) has significantly tightened its requirements for membership, moving to an increased emphasis on tertiary qualifications. The Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC), one of the public bodies funding counselling in New Zealand, recently required all its approved counsellors to reapply under more stringent criteria. ACC has also introduced changes to the counselling approval process which require the counsellor to structure the counselling process and constantly report on that process. This is regarded by many counsellors to be intrusive and counter therapeutic, according to an article published in the New Zealand Health Review (2003, July). The new counselling approval procedures introduced by ACC also place an increased emphasis on abnormal psychology including assessment and diagnosis using the criteria of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). This change was criticised in the New Zealand Health Review article for enforcing a medical model on counsellors, who may work from a variety of different non medical models. This change was also criticised for being abusive of clients, by labelling them as mentally disordered. There were other aspects of the new procedures which were also considered to be abusive of clients including the requirement to provide substantial detail of sexual abuse at a relatively early stage of engagement, and the requirement for the client to undergo Diagnostic and Treatment Assessment (DATA) by an ACC DATA assessor, if they wished to continue in counselling past thirty sessions.

In September 2003 the NZAC members newsletter reported on the results of a survey which that organisation had undertaken of its members who were currently ACC

counsellors, or who had recently resigned from ACC work. The survey results indicated that most counsellors who were involved with ACC work were concerned about the changes which were regarded as over regulatory, counter therapeutic and about meeting the needs of ACC rather than clients. The survey report commented that it was the more experienced counsellors who had ceased making themselves available for ACC work, or who were contemplating doing so.

The Family Court, another public body funding counselling in New Zealand, has recently introduced new forms and procedures for counsellors wishing to be approved to work with clients funded by the Family Court. The type of information the Family Court now requires is similar to the new criteria which both the NZAC and ACC have imposed. Under the Health Practitioners Competence Assurance Bill a new state entity will be created which will administer mandatory registration for all counsellors under a registration system which will limit the type of work a counsellor may do to a defined scope of practise.

Miller (1994) predicted that changes of this type might take place in New Zealand as a result of the increasing importance of what she termed 'professionalism' in counselling. Miller (1994) defined professionalism as a response to the open market economy where service providers were required to compete with each other for shrinking resources. I read professionalism in this sense as being about status. Miller (1994) expressed the concern that as third party funding agencies were becoming the ones who had to be impressed, they could end up determining how counselling was defined, and 'professionalism', in counselling would, ironically, end up destroying the professional autonomy of counsellors in New Zealand. Miller (1994) based her prediction on changes she described which had already taken place in counselling in the United States and Britain.

Webb (1998) sounded a similar warning about potential threats to counselling in New Zealand, and described that threat as arising from 'New Right thinking'. Webb (1998) describes six ways in which she regards New Right thinking as functioning to disable socially relevant counselling provision. These involve the strategies of a culture of personal blame and responsibility, the introduction of user pays and contracted counselling, and the

hijacking of principles and concepts, (which Webb (1988) describes as a type of discursive guerrilla tactics; using the language of social caring to entrap practitioners into a state of powerlessness). Other strategies include overwork and constant reorganisation and the introduction of professional administrators, persons in positions of organisational power who know nothing about the work which is the primary purpose of the organisation. Webb (1998) concludes that these strategies could have the effect of deskilling the counsellor as counsellors energies are directed more and more towards their own personal survival and both client and wider community issues receive less attention.

The scene is set then. Enter stage left; a small group of women counsellors who have lived/are in the process of living, through these changes. Enter stage right; another of their number who wishes to investigate and document their experience in doing so. Why? you might ask. Well, firstly so that those counsellors have the opportunity to tell their story, and secondly, so that the one who wishes to investigate and document can use her analysis of those stories to try and advance current understandings of the meaning(s) of power and resistance.

Regulations and other requirements which institutions may apply to individuals could be described as an 'apparatus' for the control of individuals (Foucault, 1995). The writings of Michel Foucault have been described as "the most important contemporary effort to develop a method for the study of human beings and to diagnose the current situation of our society" (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983, p. xvii). Dreyfus & Rabinow (1983) describe that method as a unique combination of some aspects of structuralism with some aspects of hermeneutics, without strictly speaking being either of those things.

The writings of Michel Foucault which I refer to in this project are mostly drawn from the text *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1995). Although subtitled 'the birth of the prison' this book is not really about prison per se, but about the development of disciplinary technology with the prison used as a metaphor for society in general (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983).

Foucault (1995) describes how modern western culture has created the individual as object and furthermore has installed within each individual a system of internal surveillance which render the self as object visible and therefore able to be controlled. Although the surveillance is internal, and individuals experience this control practise as 'self' control, the norms against which the object self is evaluated are culturally determined.

Foucault (1995) uses the example of the Panopticon (a model prison) as a metaphor for the surveillance of the individual as object. The Panopticon prison was designed around a central control tower which had windows all around it. Around the central tower was a ring of prison cells each with a large window facing inwards towards the central tower and another large window on the wall opposite facing outwards. The benefits of this design from a prison administrators point of view were not simply that all the prisoners in the ring of cells would be visible to a single guard in the tower, but that knowing this, the prisoners would not do anything they thought they might get into trouble for. The effect of the constant visibility would be thus to create 'the guard' in the mind of each prisoner, so that the prisoners became their own controllers. According to Foucault (1995) the control of individuals by the culture of the society works in the same way, that is we are all prisoner and we are all our own guard, monitoring and adjusting our behaviour so that it conforms to the norms of the society. Foucault (1995) called the type of power exercised in this way 'disciplinary power' and the means of application of disciplinary power were referred to as 'disciplinary apparatus' or 'disciplinary technologies'.

Rose (1989) builds on the analysis of Foucault (1995) to explore in some detail the disciplinary technologies individuals are subject to in various settings and the way these control practices affect the individual's experience of themselves. Of particular interest to me are the descriptions Rose (1989) provides of psychologists as agents in the exercise of disciplinary power. Rose (1989) traces the development of psychometrics and developmental psychology to the eugenics movement of the nineteenth century. He describes how the eugenicists regarded feeble mindedness as the major social problem of the time. The feeble minded were considered "kith and kin of the prostitute, the tubercular, the insane, the unemployable, the vagrant and the libertine - all manifestations

of a degenerate constitution" (Rose, 1989, p. 139). Another major concern was that "the race renewed itself most rapidly from its inferior sections, with a consequent increase in hereditary unfitness down the generations" (Rose, 1989, p. 139).

According to Rose (1989) identification and management of the feeble minded and other types of inferiors was the motivation behind the development of the concept of 'normal intelligence' and subsequent tests to find which individuals fell below the norm. Rose (1989) describes how "Eugenics sought a link between the biological, heritable, variable basis of mental characteristics and the criteria of social worth. This link was forged by psychologists, who measured the senses and related those measurements with social judgements" (Rose, 1989, p. 141).

Rose (1989) considered the disciplinary apparatus of developmental psychology to be even more powerful and pervasive than that found in psychometrics and I am in agreement with Rose here. I can remember what it was like to be a mother of a small child and have the 'developmental norms' which my child should attain listed for me in the Plunket book. The Plunket nurse would come to the house to check up and make sure that 'things were as they should be' with my child. I was concerned lest my child should fail to perform according to the schedule and be therefore described as 'slow' or 'behind' in a particular developmental measure, because, in my experience, those labels once applied, knew no bounds, and tended to stick.

As with psychometrics Rose (1989) views developmental psychology as a eugenics inspired project whereby the state seeks to differentiate inferior individuals so that it can institute different stronger control practices against that population, that particular problematical section of society, 'slow children', 'problem individuals'. I see developmental psychology a little differently, having experienced its effects as a mother, I view it as also being a patriarchal control practise aimed at women in general and mothers in particular. If my child had failed to meet its developmental targets then there was no doubt in my mind that I would have failed as a mother, me personally, not my husband, not my family, not my community and certainly not society at large, but me myself. I would have failed to

fulfil one of those most basic fundamental functions which according to society gave women a reason for being, and that was producing and raising a 'normal healthy' child.

Although, generally speaking I find the analysis provided by both Foucault (1995) and Rose (1989) to be extremely useful, I have a problem with the descriptions which these authors provide of these types of power operations, when I try and apply them to my own profession. The increasing raft of regulations and requirements which various institutions may these days apply to counsellors could be described as a 'disciplinary apparatus' (Foucault, 1995), which has the effect of positioning the counsellor in a field of view and subject to the disciplinary or 'normalising gaze' (Rose, 1989). The disciplinary gaze could be described as having the function of exercising disciplinary power over the counsellor in order to produce the 'docile' counsellor, who in turn uses normative regimes to discipline clients to conform to the norms of the society (Rose, 1989). I do not like to think of my profession in this way, and would like to think that it was possible to resist such power practices. A problem arises for me here though, because neither of these authors provides any encouraging descriptions of resistance to disciplinary power, and I do experience my counselling subculture as expressing some resistance to the changes which have happened in the industry over the last ten years.

Before I present my readings of the stories of my peers, there are some other tasks I must attend to. Firstly I must provide some description of the particular setting within theoretical psychology in which I see myself attempting to operate, namely social constructionism. This is the task I do battle with in Chapter One. Secondly I must attend to the requirements of self disclosure and reflexivity, by giving some background to myself as counsellor and feminist, and this is done in Chapter Two. In Chapter Three I explore issues of methodology concerning the use of narrative. In Chapter Four I present a theoretical framework from my counselling practise which I use to recognise narratives. Chapters Five, Six and Seven focus on the stories of my participants and in Chapter Eight I (psycho) analyse stories about power relations which can be read in the stories of the counsellor.