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THEORISING 'SELF'

Poststructuralist Interpretations of Self Construction and Psychotherapy

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology at Massey University

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2002
ABSTRACT

Through post-structuralist theory this study offers a critical view of relationships between self and psychotherapy. It suggests that 'belief systems' concerning the self are embodied in institutional and technical practices through which forms of individuality are specified and governed. It proposes that psychotherapy, as 'modern knowledge and expertise' of the psyche plays a role in the stimulation of subjectivity. Making use of narrative inquiry and psychotherapeutics as devices of access to self engagement, it argues that psychotherapeutics are psychological intervention technologies of domination and power functioning to assist the assemblage of selves. The study originates through the assumption that psychological knowledge contributes to the way we are in the world, and that we are often produced with little knowledge of production processes.

Concern with subjectification of self, and relationships between assembling of selves and psychological intervention strategies designed to assist assemblage, warrants theoretical discussion combined with an ethnomethodological participant observation strategy. Through a re-presentation and interrogation of contemporary post-structuralist debate on the constitution of self the study considers therapeutic process as a situated product of temporal discursive practices of technology and power and delivery of subjectified self as a terrain of understanding through which psychotherapeutics perform, both as interpretative technology and producer. Narrative is deliberated as an assembling and organising device through which meaning-making can be accessed. Processes of subjectification are constituted through a participant observation study of four psychotherapeutic practices offered through training institutions in New Zealand. They are Bioenergetic Analysis, Gestalt, Narrative Therapy, and Psychodrama. Engagement with training programmes produces five discrete narratives that articulate and reflect on the experience of self in relation to these technologies. The study analyses processes of subjectification through interpretation of the narratives. In particular, interpretation draws attention to issues of embodiment, multiplicity, constraint, and positioning, suggesting that they are articulated through power relations, questions of authority, and of legitimacy.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All works merit acknowledgements and this one is no exception. Many people have contributed, both directly and indirectly. In particular, it has been a privilege to enjoy the supervisory expertise of Dr Mandy Morgan, an exemplary teacher and mentor without whom this study would have remained a dream. Her enthusiasm, encouragement, perceptiveness, creative skills, wisdom, and patience have contributed in large measure to the production of this work. My gratitude goes to Associate Professor Kerry Chamberlain for early input and suggestions, and to Dr Keith Tuffin who has maintained unwavering support over the years. Thanks must also go to Keith for his learned reflections and rigorous evaluation of the penultimate draft of the manuscript. Thank you to the Massey University Library staff for their most excellent service. I am grateful for the support of colleagues, Paul White, Linda Bain, Christina Howard, and Rachael Pond, each of whom have affirmed the work, been interested, and made innumerable offers of help. Thank you Rachael for your invaluable mentoring skills during the later days. For their anticipation and interest in my musings I wish to thank members of The New Zealand Society for Bioenergetic Analysis, specifically, Ferrell Irvine, Pye Bowden, Kathryn Carmichael, Heidi Young, Phil Straker, and Michael Short. To Linda MacKnight, thank you for looking after Dwight. I could not have finished without you taking responsibility for his care. Special thanks go to my family for their confidence and reminders that there is more to life than intellectual pursuits alone. Last, but not least, my heartfelt appreciation goes to my partner Marcus Boroughs for his generosity, warm encouragement, interest, support, and understanding throughout the long days and nights of thesis production.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ................................................................................................................. ii

Acknowledgments .................................................................................................. iii

Chapter One
Introducing the Subject............................................................................................ 1

Chapter Two
Bringing Self into View............................................................................................ 7

Chapter Three
The Practice of Psychotherapy.................................................................................. 39

Chapter Four
Psychotherapy and Self............................................................................................ 53

Chapter Five
Converging with Narrative: An Organising Strategy.............................................. 60

Chapter Six
Reflecting on the Process.......................................................................................... 79

Chapter Seven
Bioenergetics and the Self....................................................................................... 93

Chapter Eight
Experiencing Psychodrama.................................................................................... 104
Chapter Nine
A Gestalt Exposure ................................................................. 124

Chapter Ten
Narrative Therapy ................................................................. 144

Chapter Eleven
A Story About Bioenergetics ..................................................... 170

Chapter Twelve
Speaking Subjectivity: Engaging with Self .................................. 177

Chapter Thirteen
A Parting Word ................................................................. 219

References ................................................................. 222