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THEORIZING ‘SELF’

Poststructuralist Interpretations of Self Construction and Psychotherapy

*A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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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 ethnmethodological 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.

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