Should We Tell the Truth?

by Gwen Reekie

Gwen is an Auckland-based Psychodramatist and Sociologist who works with mothers committed to 'being the mother you want to be'. She aims to keep herself and others awake to the reality-testing sociological scrutiny can bring to the world of psychotherapy. In this article she examines the social pressures on individuals to normalise and confess and explores implications for us as group leaders.

> 'The truthful rendering into speech of who one is, to one's parents, one's teachers, one's doctor, one's lover, and oneself, is installed at the heart of contemporary procedures of individualisation' (Rose 1993).

CONFESSING

According to Foucault (1979, 1988), we western human beings have become confessing animals – obsessed with 'telling the truth'. He sees this characteristic as an important element in individualistic societies where members aren't bound together by overt, dominating power, but by forms of government that are opaque and homogenising. He considers we have learned to 'tell the truth' about more and more areas of our lives. More and more of that truth (some about matters not so long ago outside the public domain and its scrutiny) is available for examination and placement on a continuum of the normal to the abnormal. He also considers that an expanding army of experts assists us to notice when we err towards the abnormal and then move back to the normal.

I am interested in the psychotherapeutic expert's relationship to that examination and placement.

Dr Dick Solomon, a highly intelligent alien visitor to Earth, in the television program 'Third Rock from the Sun', immediately grasped what was expected of a him when he and his partner Dr Mary Albright went along to a couple enrichment weekend. Like everyone else he donned a white suit, sat in a circle on the floor, looked joyful or sad or compassionate or understanding, declared deepest thoughts and feelings, and more than anyone else proclaimed his profound fears and anguish about rejection. The facilitator and other group members clapped him. And clapped him more and more. He became the sociometric star. Usually Mary (an ordinary earthling professor) had been pretty tolerant of

Dick – considering his egocentricity. In this group, though, she wasn't quick enough in her analysis of the system. She didn't always talk about what was going on for her. But she could not ignore her recognition of Dick's pretensions. She openly challenged Dick's delusional self-presentation and was castigated by the group for seeing things differently. She became the negative star.

The system of the couple enrichment weekend rapidly clarified and identified the expected range of input from participants: inadmissible input was emphasised by withholding approval or rejection. A continuum of the positive to the negative was immediately displayed, a field of comparison, differentiation, hierarchisation, reward and punishment and homogenisation. The totally unacceptable or rejected – what Foucault (1979) terms 'the external frontier of the abnormal' – was made especially clear. It was a process which examined and judged everyone's input in relation to the input of everyone else and where the abnormal was identified.

Foucault also describes a similar process in the 18th century Ecole Militaire's honorary classification system in which pupils wore coloured epaulettes. It was clear if pupils were 'very good' because their epaulettes were silver; 'good' pupils' wore red silk and silver, 'mediocre' pupils' wore red wool, and 'bad' pupils' wore brown wool. This created an obvious continuum of the positive to the negative for self-examination of where one stood in relation to other people.

HISTORICAL ORIGINS

Foucault claims that this process of self-examination and judgement developed because the enormous social changes that took pace in western societies from the middle ages required new norms, governance and new collaboration. People were moving from rural areas to urban areas, from settled communities with a known and accepted culture into the beginnings of industrialised populations with new ways of living, working, worshipping, travelling, organising time and cooperating with one another. Given that people were setting limits on external power and becoming increasingly individualistic, an art of government evolved which focused on maximum effectiveness with minimum political and economic cost.

This demanded populations of individuals freely, if not consciously, critiquing their own identities, with each individual regulating self and society in accord with a societal standard. They would freely choose and regulate identities and so foster the happiness of the population as a whole. This happiness or social security would come about if people who were formally free became a self-organised collective making their own decisions, recognising that this privilege applied to all the others too. Happiness, and fostering behaviours conducive to cooperation, became essential to governance. An ever-wider net was thrown out to catch more and more aspects of people's lives to be included in a form of consensus.

This cooperation was crucially influenced by the way individuals went about organising their conduct. They were no longer reacting to the introjected voices of the gods who constantly observed and judged and punished their actions. Individuals were now actively cooperating in the formation of themselves as selves with free choice and with an appreciation of the requirements of the collective of society as a whole. Aspects of people's lives were now caught up in the non-private and could be

examined opaquely rather than coercively, helped by the development of a particular type of confession – what Foucault calls 'verbalisation' – in Western societies.

VERBALISATION

Verbalisation expanded from medieval Christian confession, which aimed at self-improvement by sacrificing the self to a higher authority; concentrating on what the individual was thinking at a particular moment (the area of prime movement either toward or away from God), and confessing these thoughts before a superior. It was about looking for bad intentions, renouncing one's will and one's self and creating a new self. Verbalisation called for a preceding self-examination, for individuals to be subjectified to themselves as they self-examined, in the presence of a real or imagined other.

According to Foucault (1988), since the 18th century these techniques have been secularised and verbalised, with the expert (including the psychotherapeutic expert) of today having replaced the priestly hearer of confession in a pursuit of the truth. If and when individuals fail in some way, they can call in an expert to help out. For example, if individuals see themselves failing to express themselves adequately in specific situations they can call upon a psychotherapeutic expert, and maybe set out on a program of recovery so that they can express themselves adequately.

He argues that an essential bonding element for individualistic peoples is this verbalisation which assists their comfort with and collaboration in a particular political or social arrangement, with a growing army of experts ready to assist them to make decisions about the self they freely choose to develop.

RESPONSE TO FOUCAULT FROM THE PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC FIELD

In the late 1980s and early 1990s I was ploughing through Foucault's writing. Some was being popularised, with the phrases 'construction of identity' and 'deconstruction of identity' especially popular and used at what seemed every opportunity by social scientists. These phrases were problematic for people working in the psychotherapeutic area. In the face of their implied or perceived challenge, people from various therapeutic modalities protested that their particular modality most certainly did not collude with constructing identity focused on fitting a particular political or social arrangement. Psychotherapists co-opted the phrases. They asserted that their practitioners, by raising awareness of transference and counter-transference issues, and by helping people to take responsibility to develop their identity themselves, actively worked to deconstruct imposed identities, and challenged rather than colluded with external construction.

By the mid-1990s I was doing both postgraduate study focusing on social influences on the formation of the self, and advanced psychodrama training. I was jolted by completing a simple exercise at university involving identification of who managed the process in psychotherapeutic settings. I already knew that the director/therapist/ counsellor/group therapist was a significant element in clients' explorations of their own experiences and motivations, and the understanding they came to about them. Now I found it difficult to refute the contention that the therapist is unavoidably a considerable influence in the interstices – the gaps between areas of understanding – in constraining exploration, navigation and preference from among the understandings or knowledges available.

Is Foucault anywhere near accurate about the existence of normalisation processes by which we fit ourselves to a particular social or political arrangement? Is there any merit in Argyris's idea that from whatever data we observe we make a selection, add meanings to it, from which we make assumptions, leading to conclusions, from which we adopt beliefs considered by us to be the truth and obvious?

As we more completely fit a particular social or political arrangement, we are often less able to accept Moreno's understanding that the universe has been created to include every one of us (1953). We are more likely to suppress difference, doubtful of the merit in alternate arrangements and the truths of others which do not fit familiarly with ours.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PSYCHODRAMATISTS

Psychodramatists are aware of Moreno's teaching that health comes from a balance of conserve with spontaneity. This could be understood as a balance between public and personal influence or societal and individual pressures and preferences. So, from this cursory presentation of Foucault's ideas and literature, what are the implications for you and me as psychodramatists?

For a start, I have to promote a culture that provides an acceptance of personal control, recognising the ease with which silken threads of dependency proliferate. I am using examples from my work with mothers who are concerned about the effect of their stress and anger on their children. These women want to be mothers who are 'good enough', who want to change inter-generational patterns of neglectful or abusive parenting.

I hold myself to the consciousness that personal control and self-determination is my commitment. I keep myself mindful that in being there as a leader and the mothers being there as group members, we have already made our meeting an agent of the societal pressure to be the mother they believe they should be. To be that mother each of them will be looking to each other and particularly to me for guiding clues and approval for their efforts and achievements. The group's title *Being the Mother You Want to Be* cuts into this homogenising influence. As I commence, I lightly debunk the role models of women's magazines, accepted mythic figures and myself as a supposed expert. I promote the idea that they are the best guide and coach for themselves, that individually and collectively they can select from what is available in the course of learning and review they are engaged in. I am deliberately playful and light in presentation, while firm in my own rejection of all action that permits abuse or neglect of children.

I have to ensure that people are not snared into 'telling their truth' rather than being aware of their experience when we work with doubling and during group warm-up and sharing. I am super-vigilant to any woman in the group beginning to confess, or 'tell the truth', or to 'open up'. When this happens other group members already know to soften their bodies, increase the impression of receptivity in their facial sculpting and open their eyes and hearts. Their confessor is about to be the *Representative of Collective Shame* and *Reliever of Silence and Hiddenness*. Obviously this is worthy of silver epaulettes. However, the confessing itself binds the woman to societal rule-following and will be self-programming to greater submission to societal demands for ever-heavier expectations. So I break in and lead the

group towards widespread identification with small revelations of inner experience. I challenge the would-be confessor to not say one thing that they are not absolutely ready to share and want to reveal. I question the need to reveal anything other than those things that they see as leading towards their goal or that they believe will be of loving assistance to another member. Even then I suggest choice be made carefully.

I have to be alert when some normalities/truths are approved of and awarded the same silver epaulette as Dick Solomon's whilst others the brown like Mary Albright's. Some years ago a supervisor encouraged me to challenge a group member's use of a particular substance, which I decided not to do. To challenge the use of a substance which probably reduced motivation and responsibility in her child-caring was probably sensible. She was a teenage mother with agonising life experience and deprivation, stepping into the unknown by coming along to the group and by making friends with another young woman who lived nearby. They met in a park for a chat and a smoke whilst their children played on the swings. My analysis was that she was moving from the stage of all-identity to the stage of the double, she was learning to listen and talk with the other members of the group and with me, she was beginning to have some dreams about what she might do with her life. I was surprised when she said at the end of the group that she had decided to make contact with her mother. Her meetings in the park, smoking under the trees, had combined with her coming along to the group to provide a stage of all-identity robust enough to significantly influence her ability to create a new social network.

Before reading Foucault I had had some curiosity about the abnormal. Since then I've become even more curious – and cautious – about the 'normal' and what I contribute to it.

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