

THERAPY ON THE COUCH

A SHRINKING
FUTURE?



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Psychotherapy and its discontents

- ▶ Views from:
 - ▶ Sociology
 - ▶ Marxism
 - ▶ Feminism
 - ▶ Jeffrey Masson, and other internal critics

Masson

- ▶ Opened up critical debate - fluent but hardly a reasoned critic
- ▶ Main (only?) point: Therapy is tyranny.
 - ▶ The power imbalance between therapist and client inevitably leads to the abuse of power by the therapist
- ▶ How might this happen?
 - ▶ Power + vulnerability + intimacy =?
 - ▶ Does therapy meet the needs of the therapist?

Response to Masson

- ▶ Holmes ('92) identifies some issues:
 - ▶ Early analysts interpreted real trauma as phantasy – but not for last 50 years. Bowlby, Winnicott and others emphasised the importance of real loss and trauma.
 - ▶ Informed consent – can distressed, emotionally aroused people choose the right therapy and therapist? Improved regulation has helped
 - ▶ Selection & training – much has been achieved

Response to Masson 2

- ▶ Abuse (sexual harassment, inappropriate relationship between therapists and clients)
 - ▶ Infrequently but widely reported across many professions, not confined to therapists
 - ▶ Therapists not immune to feeling envy, dislike, sexual arousal as well as compassion.
 - ▶ But important not to act on, reveal or ignore.
 - ▶ Use transference and counter-transference to help understand and in supervision.

Marxist view

- ▶ Law, religion, culture, education etc. reflect and serve the economic interests of the dominant class.
 - ▶ Structural features reflect economic base
 - ▶ Therapy individualises problems which may be better thought of in class terms as consequences of capitalist exploitation.
 - ▶ May reconcile the exploited to their exploitation and obscures the true path to change – revolutionary action.
 - ▶ Therefore promotes false consciousness and is a form of oppression

Marxist view – rebuttal

- ▶ Marxism has a non-compassionate utilitarian tradition of ignoring the individual (& women)
 - ▶ Arguably a moral & practical failure.
- ▶ Therapy sees personal responsibility not as blame but as a form of empowerment
- ▶ Therapy should be about empowerment, challenging the given, the accepted, the taught, not a way of enforcing conformity
- ▶ Potential for radical therapy, early attempts to reconcile Marxism and Psychoanalysis – Reich and the orgone box.

Feminist view

- ▶ Therapy as potentially oppressive
 - ▶ in reconciling women to patriarchy
 - ▶ in focussing on the individual not systemically
 - ▶ in obscuring true consciousness
- ▶ But therapy sees personal responsibility not as blame but as a form of empowerment, a way of challenging the given, not a way of enforcing conformity
- ▶ Many feminist practitioners as well as critics, eg. Juliet Mitchell within psychoanalysis

Cultural perspective

- ▶ Unproven, overblown & unconvincing? Or a right to essential health care?
- ▶ A western individualist cultural fad? Or genuinely enabling & empowering?
- ▶ Symptomatic of the decline of community, cultural stability, religious observance, extended family etc?
- ▶ A response to the saturated self (Gergen) / empty self (Cushman)?