Shaping the self through psychotherapeutic means: gender and cross-generational perspectives

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Abstract

This paper explores psychotherapeutic themes and modes of thought emerging in interviews with mothers and daughters participating in a cross-generational study of young women ‘on the margins’. The focus of the discussion is two-fold. First it discusses current theoretical debates concerning the ascendancy of psychotherapeutic modes of constituting the self, and argues that we require closer attention to the gendered and differentiated ways in which these are registered and articulated. Second, it considers the significance of ‘happiness’ and the ways in which pairs of mothers and daughters draw upon a repertoire of psychotherapeutic discourses to represent their relation to schooling, self, family, and work. It concludes with some speculative observations about the significance of attending to the psychotherapeutic turn for understanding contemporary femininity, the desire for openness as a measure of a good relationship (and of democracy), and contemporary aspirations of happiness.

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Int.: So there is quite a few people you can go to? Are there any times when you don’t get enough support, do you think?

Margaret: Nah, I have done counselling, I have done welfare co-ordinators, I have done chaplains, I have done nurse, I have basically had a lot of support. (student aged 17 in ‘Alternative Year 10’ program)

Introduction

This paper explores psychotherapeutic themes and modes of thought emerging in interviews with mothers and daughters participating in a cross-generational study of young women ‘on the margins’. We are investigating emerging themes and tropes in the ‘life stories’ they tell us through a focus on the traces and impact of therapeutic culture in everyday discourse. This was not a study initially designed to examine ‘psychotherapeutic culture’ or practices. But as we listened to the mothers and daughters, heard them talking about their ambitions, their recollections of important things, their attitudes to school, their relationships with each other and with friends, we were struck by a number of emphasised discursive and emotional concerns. Here we draw out two of those— the desire and value of ‘talking’ and being ‘open’ in relationships, and the desire ‘to be happy’, (particularly so in the wishes of mothers for their daughters). We attempt to elaborate and relocate these repeated desires by engaging with debates about therapeutic culture and new figurations of shaping the self.

First, we begin by explaining how (and why) we are deploying the phrase ‘therapeutic culture’ and briefly overview some of the key debates concerning both the ascendancy of the therapeutic and what it signifies in terms of new forms of personhood and social relations. Here we review both positive and pessimistic assessments of the potential and limitations of this cultural turn.

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1 Young women negotiating from the margins of education and work: Towards gender justice in education and youth policies and programs, ARC Discovery Grant, 2002-04, Investigators Julie McLeod, Jane Kenway, Alison Mackinnon, and Andrea Allard, with researchers Katie Wright, Elizabeth Bullen and Danni Nicholas-Sexton. The study is investigating the educational, work and social experiences and decisions of marginalised young women living in economically disadvantaged (urban/rural fringe) locations, who are ‘at risk’ of early school leaving, and young women who have recently left school early. We are also interviewing the mothers of these groups of young women in order to build up a cross-generational perspective on their experiences. One focus is to see how such experiences have been negotiated differently by the two generations, and to understand shifts and continuities in the ways in which the mothers and the daughters represented narratives of their ‘life stories’ to us.

2 But we were attuned to these issues and to the prominence of debates about and practices of self-making (Wright 2003; McLeod 2000, 2002; Mansfield 2000; Bendle, 2002).
Second, we consider arguments concerning the regulation of the self through psy-based knowledges (and expert systems) as well as those concerning the rise of what Nikolas Rose (1999, 91) calls a ‘new culture of the self’. We suggest that while such arguments are persuasive and insightful, there is often some neglect of the gender (and generationally) differentiated ways in which psy-knowledges and the therapeutic are mobilised. In the third and final sections, we elaborate this argument with reference to key themes that recurred in interviews with mothers and daughters: the practice of ‘talking through things’ and of being ‘open’ in relationships (mother/daughter, and among friends) and the desire for ‘happiness’. These tropes, as we have suggested, can be fruitfully interpreted as examples of the infiltration of the therapeutic into the everyday. There is a distinction here between the practice of (clinical) therapy and the form and effects of therapeutic culture. We are attending to the latter and the manner in which discourses, ways of thinking and of shaping the self are saturated with therapeutic techniques and strategies for self-understanding and self-making. Let us explain.

Section 1. Overview: therapeutic culture and its critics

During the last quarter of the twentieth-century, the psychotherapeutic became a central motif in Anglo-American cultures. Psychology experienced growth that far outnumbered population increase, counselling became commonplace and in recent years we have witnessed the emergence of a range of ‘experts’ in matters of the psyche and the shaping of the individual person—‘life coaches’ being just one example.

The institutional base of the therapeutic and the growth of the professions, however, is only part of the story. The influence extends beyond the discipline of psychology and beyond the reach of the consulting room to a range of cultural formations that, in ways more or less direct, deploy a psychotherapeutic worldview. Telephone help-lines, self-help books and television talk shows are often cited as examples of the influence of psychology and the spread of the therapeutic, but its influence extends at the most abstract political and most intimately personal spheres through a range of cultural formations and practices. Psychotherapeutic culture and the institutional practices of psychotherapists and other psy-workers are both constitutive of, and imbricated in each other. That is to say, psychotherapeutic practices and therapeutic culture can, and must be understood as discrete entities that are nonetheless intimately connected.

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3 Defined by Dana Cloud (1998) as ‘a set of political and cultural discourses that have adopted psychotherapy’s lexicon’ (xiv), therapeutic culture is diverse and multifaceted.
The rapid and pervasive ascendancy of therapeutic culture has been the subject of considerable intellectual debate, and scholarly attention has been variously focused on the implications of such a changing cultural landscape for the shaping of self and society (eg. Chriss 1999; Cloud, 1998; Furedi, 2004; Gross 1978; Halmos 1965; Lasch 1979; Mokowitz, 2001; Parker 1997; Rieff 1966; Rose 1990). In summary, a range of assessments of the ‘therapeutic’ argue that the cult of the self and the therapeutic more generally have set the stage for the production of a particular formation of modern selfhood. Many accounts view the impact of therapeutic culture pessimistically, arguing from various perspectives that the shaping of modern selfhood is regulated and undermined by the psychotherapeutic ethos and psychotherapeutic practices. On the other hand, some theorists recognise emancipatory potential within the therapeutic. Here we will counterpose two influential interpretations of the therapeutic.

Therapeutic culture presents a powerful image of the self, argues Frank Furedi (2004, 107-8), as it positions individuals ‘at least potentially, in charge of their own fate’. In such a cultural climate, liberation is enacted through ‘choice, autonomy, self-knowledge and self-awareness’, but Furedi has a rather more sinister view as he positions the reality of therapeutic culture as promoting the self-as-victim. The emancipatory promise of the autonomous choosing individual is contradicted according to this reading of the individual as vulnerable. Here Furedi’s claims echo those of Lasch, that ‘therapeutic points of view and practices’ unburden people of their adult responsibilities as they are positioned under the influence of expert authority (Lasch, 1979 cited in Furedi, 2004, 103). In the 1970s Lasch was concerned about the ‘turn inwards’, away from politics and engagement with public issues, towards what he regarded as a narcissistic obsession with personal fulfilment and an unhealthy reliance on experts.

In contrast, Anthony Giddens offers a reading of the therapeutic that draws out its emancipatory potential. For Giddens, the modern self is engaged in a process of reflexive monitoring. Thus, therapeutic culture and ‘therapy is not simply a means of coping with novel anxieties’, which according to Giddens may be different but not necessarily more intense than in pre-modern times, ‘but an expression of the reflexivity of the self’ (Giddens 1991, 34). At a time in which self and world are increasingly reflected upon, therapy and the therapeutic offer, he argues, possibilities for self-elaboration, a space in which the development of the life project may be facilitated. He argues that it is ‘an expert system deeply implicated in the reflexive project of self … a phenomenon of modernity’s reflexivity’, a technique that assists in life-planning, which includes a certain construction of the past as part of the life-project of the modern individual (Giddens 1991, 180).
We now turn to a brief consideration of how the therapeutic turn has produced a culture of the self, which draws extensively upon psychological knowledges and (quasi)therapeutic techniques to know thyself and make thyself. In doing so, we point to some of the ways in which the effects of ‘therapeutic culture’ can be more contradictory, particularly for women, than the usual binary/polarised assessments admit.

Section 2. From therapeutic culture to psychotherapeutic practices of the self

Questions of ‘identity’ have become hallmarks of much research in the social sciences and humanities (Bendle 2002; Hall 1996). Paralleling both the rise of the therapeutic and its attention to ‘know thyself’, there has been an explosion of theoretical interest in how identity/subjectivity is produced, performed, contested, and how it is unstable, reflexive, a project, a portfolio, hybrid, indeterminate… and so forth.

Here we focus on arguments concerning the government of the self through psychotherapeutic means, looking particularly at arguments developed by Nickolas Rose and his Foucauldian inflected analysis of forms of subjectification. Rose argues that in current times, psychological knowledges and techniques structure the way in which we understand and ‘know ’ourselves and mediate our social and personal experiences.

Today, psychologists elaborate complex emotional, interpersonal and organization techniques by which the practices of everyday life can be organised according to the ethic of autonomous selfhood. This know-how has been disseminated by two main routes. The first route works through reshaping the practices of those who exercise authority over others—social workers, managers, teachers, nurses—such that they exercise their powers in order to nurture and direct these individual strivings in the most appropriate and productive fashions. [Here one sees the elaboration, in a plethora of self-instruction manuals, training courses and consultancy exercises, of a new set of relational technologies that appear to give professional authority an almost therapeutic character]. The second route operates by what one can term the psychotherapies of normality, which promulgate new ways of planning life, and approaching predicaments, and disseminate new procedures for understanding oneself and acting upon oneself to overcome dissatisfactions, realize one’s potential, gain happiness and achieve autonomy’(Rose 1999 p.90).

Autonomous individuals know and conduct themselves through these psychotherapeutic lenses and discourses—these constitute the contemporary form of government of the self and
of others. There is an emphasised process of scrutinising relationships—those of and with other people, as well as the project of ‘relating to’ oneself—leading to a ‘new culture of the self’ (Rose 1999, 91). As we shall shortly show, these are emphasised themes and practices in our interviews.

What is under-emphasised and somewhat neglected, however, in Rose’s persuasive argument is much sense in which these psychotherapeutic practices are gendered, or indeed differentiated according to other identity categories. In cultures saturated with knowledge of gender difference, and particularly the feminisation of affect, communication and ‘relationships’, such therapeutic techniques of the self are going to resonate differently for men and women, girls and boys. Relating to oneself, the quest for self-knowledge and the ‘norm of autonomy’ resonate differently for men and women because of the traditional positioning of femininity in service of the other. This remains the case even when both men and women are constituted through a psycho-therapeutic culture of the self (Rose 1999).

For women, care and attention to the self is always complicated by care for the other. The question of what possibilities for women are opened up by and in a ‘culture of the self’, when so much of their/our identity work has been formed in care of the other, may be elucidated by a closer attention to embodied and gender differentiated experiences. It is possible, then, that an emphasised attention to care of the self might open transformative/emancipatory spaces [of freedom?] for women, in a way that disturbs what otherwise appears as a culture of narcissism. All too often there is a lack of attention to such questions in the theoretical literature.

In much of the work in this area (including that of Rose) there is little sense of the visceral, and embodied or the mundane and messy everyday in which the psychotherapeutic takes place. (Domestic life is bracketed out, except as a site for the promulgation of advice manuals). There is, additionally, scant attention to how one juggles the diverse and demanding practices of the self. Work on the project of the self is not the only thing we do. Moreover, we do it ironically, messily, and sceptically, and in the midst of caring for others, trying to make a (material, day to day) life.

The questions we are putting to Rose’s work are not simply generalised criticisms of abstract theories as disconnected from qualitative, everyday lived experience, [though there is no

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4 ‘The individual is to adopt a new relation to his or her self in the everyday world, in which the self itself is to be an object of knowledge and autonomy is to be achieved through a continual enterprise of self-improvement through the application of a rational knowledge and technique… Hence the norm of autonomy produces an intense and continuous self-scrutiny, self-dissatisfaction and self-evaluation in terms of the vocabularies and explanations of [psychotherapeutic] expertise.’ Rose 1999, p.93.
doubt an element of that]. Rather our concern is with the particular significance of this gap for theoretical work that addresses the ‘culture of the self’ and the ‘norm of autonomy’. What do such theoretical accounts occlude? Does it presume a gender-free person? Does it produce an ‘idealised’ subjectivity, or can it accommodate a subjectivity constituted in socially differentiated fields and within cultural and domestic imperatives to care for others?

In the next section, then, we consider some of the everyday ways in which certain kinds of self-understanding [which we interpret as manifestations/ instantiations of therapeutic culture] are articulated in interviews with mothers and daughters. We have found that interrogating the ‘therapeutic’ empirically brings alive, and helps us to see, its simultaneously pervasive and contradictory effects and character. In the interviews employed prospective and retrospective time lines as a way to prompt reflection and to build up a life historical account of the relation of both generations to school, work and social and family life. We are wanting to recast the mothers’ and daughters’ attention to talking and to happiness, to understand it is part of a cultural turn, rather than as, for example, a typically feminine pre-occupation, or as evidence of limited ambition.

Section 3: Talk and openness: measures of good relationships

Across all our interviews, with both mothers and daughters, there was an emphasised concern with talking, as a way of both managing problems, and as a necessary basis for building good/positive/healthy relationships. There was a presumed value in ‘talking through things’ (in the manner of a generalised and everyday ‘talking cure’), and talking was seen as a way of helping others sort out problems (talking with friends, helping them to talk over things). Talk (rather than activity) was the medium of friendship and intimacy; and talking, as a means for knowing oneself, was articulated as a kind of ‘commonsense’ as well as an effective means for resolving difficulties. Talk is experienced, in the language of sociology, as emancipatory and agentic.

For Jennifer, a 15 year old student in year 9, ‘talking’ is a major theme in her interviews with us. When asked what her family and friends actually DO if she needs support, she replied:

They just talk you know we talk about stuff and sort out a problem or something like that. (2nd int. p5).

Continuing in this vein, when asked what she does when she’s feeling down, she responded:

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5 While we did not set out to investigate manifestations of ‘therapeutic culture in the everyday life of girls and women’ (though that would be a nice topic), we did ask a number of related questions (with different end purposes in mind) about the kind of support services available to assist them and what they did when things weren’t going well for them. But our attention to the ‘therapeutic’ is not confined to such topics.

6 A common distinction in studies of gender differences in friendship, ie boys friendships are said to be characterised by activities, by sport, by doing things together, whereas girls’ friendships are said to be characterised by talk, disclosure, confession (at its negative, ‘gossip’), McLeod 2002.
Talk to a friend. Talk to Sarah sometimes about like sometimes if I have had a fight with my mum like I will call Sarah but like I won’t tell her I will just talk to her. (2nd int. p5).

When asked about times she could think of that she felt really good about a relationship, Jennifer spoke warmly of her ‘open’ relationship with her mother, Louise:

There has been like heaps of small times when like I can talk to my mum about anything like I have a question and I finally ask her and I will get it off my chest and be really good and I just feel really happy that I asked her. Times like that because like we are really close and we talk to each other about whatever. (2nd int. p4)

Similarly Margaret, a student in the Alternative Year 10 program, identifies ‘talking’ as a key strategy. Margaret has had extensive experience with ‘psy-experts’, and is utterly familiar with and phlegmatic about the alliance of therapeutic/helping interventions and forms of regulation/surveillance. Her identity at school appears completely managed through forms of the ‘confessional’ implicated in support services.

Int: So if things aren’t going well for you if you are having a bit of a hard time is there any people that you go to for help or support?
Margaret: Welfare co-ordinator. Or I talk to mum and dad or I talk to Janet’s mum and dad or I just talk to my mates…

Int: So there is quite a few people you can go to? Are there any times when you don’t get enough support do you think?
Margaret: Nah, I have done counselling, I have done welfare co-ordinators, I have done chaplains I have done nurse, I have basically had a lot of support.

‘Self talk’ was also a common strategy for getting through difficulties period, forging a stronger sense of self, operating as an interior dialogue to prompt action, and often mirroring communication modes offered by ‘psy-experts’.

Louise: I sort of say to myself well alright why am I feeling like this because I shouldn’t be feeling like this so then I kind of try and talk to myself and figure out what it is. I am able to kind of feel myself talking to myself and answering myself whereas before I would talk to myself but I never seemed to be able to get the answers, (Jennifer’s Mother, part-time hospitality worker, early 40s)

Int. Can I just ask when things aren’t going well for you and you are having a bit of a down time, what sort of things do you do to cheer yourself up?
Margaret: I either sit and write letters or I put Enya on or I just lock myself in the room and yell, sometimes I just yell, otherwise I try and talk to someone about it without getting too cross, like yesterday.
Both mothers and daughters associated the current era and present generation with increasing openness and opportunities for talk. Reflecting on what is different about her generation and that of her mother, Jennifer says

> Nowadays there’s like more people you can talk to if you have problems at home and stuff like that there’s like counsellors there’s like heaps of people you can talk to and get hold of and stuff like that so that’s all I think. (1st int, p8).

Jennifer’s mother, Louise, places a high premium on talking, seeing ‘openness’ within the family and a capacity and willingness for communication as key markers of generational change.

**Int** …Can you think about other differences between say your generation and what it is like now for kids like your daughter…?

**Louise:** I think that maybe all boils down to communication, everything because as much as I said before that I didn’t know that there was things out there, jobs out there that I could have perhaps done, my sister in law who is sort of close to the same age, she is a nurse so she would have perhaps been told it or communication was perhaps different with different people. I didn’t have huge communication with my mum and I am kind of hoping that Jennifer has with me so we get to talk more about lots of issues whereas I didn’t with my mum and I don’t know that that has got a lot to do with the generation or whether it is just communication is different. That’s what I think (1st int. p10).

Louise’s intense desire for openness is particularly striking in her anticipating how to respond to her daughter’s (Jennifer) first sexual experience (of intercourse). She retells an exchange. ‘I have to say well alright you are 16, as much as I would prefer it not to happen, it is going to happen one day so I actually said to her well maybe if it is going to happen one day maybe we can try and do something really nice and maybe take you to a really nice place rather than it be in the back seat of some bodies car, or in your bedroom in 10 minutes because you think mum and dad might be home, that kind of thing. I said if you are going to both do it one day or another maybe you can do it so it is actually really special’ … ‘she said like go out for tea, and I said yeah go out for dinner and may be we can book you into somewhere nice’ (2nd int p.4).

Here an event that is marked as ‘personally’ and culturally significant is talked through in advance, with a deliberate view to making it special, rather than traumatic and hasty. We see this not so much as a strategy of surveillance as repressive control but more as a way of stage managing the personal and intimate through compulsory and increasingly normalised
openness. Jennifer’s reported reaction to her mother’s suggestion ['well then you’d know we would have done it] also indicates the extent to which talking openly about our most personal experiences has become normalised. Jennifer does not react with distaste or disapproval, but comments on the disclosure of the act, and how they would arrange the special event. Here too talk is deployed not ‘after the event’ as a way of working through issues, but as a preventative therapeutic strategy that is based on communication and openness.

Giddens writes, in relation to describing new forms of family life.

There is only one story to tell about the family today, and that is of democracy.

…Democratization in the context of the family implies equality, mutual respect, autonomy, decision-making through communication… Much the same characteristics also supply a model of parent-child relationships. Parents of course will still claim authority over children, and rightly so, but these will be more negotiated and open than before. Giddens 1998, pp.93-4

The authors of a recent study of intimate talk among parents and children question Giddens’ optimism and the possibilities he sees for ‘pure relationships’ and forms of democracy and equality in family life. They ask instead ‘how real and how achievable is the democratic ideal in family life?’ They reply that for teenagers this possibility is some way off, 'because of the structural and psychological power imbalances between parent and child' and the impossibility of 'pure relationship' in such a context of fundamental inequality (Solomon et al 2002, pp.966). However in many respects, such a response misses the point of Giddens’ observations. Of course there are inequalities and power imbalances, but the more pertinent issue is the imperatives and incitements to conduct family life according to a narrative of openness. It is not a simple matter of empirically testing the short fall between theory and practice, but of trying to re-imagine the social/cultural and discursive context in which the aspiration for intimacy and open communication takes place. A key factor here, as we have been arguing, is the insinuation of therapeutic culture, such that the question of degrees of intimacy (as an index of democracy) arises at all, and how that is then mobilised differentially within families and between women and men, and parents and children.

In our interviews, and from the mothers’ perspectives, having a relationship with their daughters where they ‘can talk about anything’ and ‘be open’ is much longed for. It is

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7 Int: So… do you think your relationship with your daughter is different from the kind of relationship you had with your mum?

Louise: Jennifer is able to come and talk to me about things and I am happy to talk to her about things whereas I didn’t do that with my mum and I am talking the girly things and the sex and the pill and condoms and all that kind of stuff. I never talked to my mum about any of those things and I don’t think it was anything to do with not having a great relationship but I think that it was just we didn’t talk about those things.
regarded as both a measure of a good relationship (predisposing to happiness) and as a way of protecting against unhappiness and alienation/anomie. As the example of Louise above suggests, *Talk is both a prophylactic and a cure; a pathway to happiness*

**Concluding thoughts**

‘What hopes do you have for her daughter?’ we asked Louise. And she, like many of the other mothers (Allard and McLeod 2003), immediately answered.

> I want her to be happy, I want her to, I want us to be friends, which I think we are, I want her to be able to talk to me about anything. I want her to be safe and hopefully still at school, still learning to be something and do something good. (1st interview. p15)

Opportunities for talk are signs of ‘good relationships’ and also an index of happiness. The capacity and willingness to talk, to confess, to be open is associated in these interviews with generational change. On the one hand this is a familiar narrative genre of progress, of the current generation being less repressed (cf Foucault and the repressive hypothesis), of a move from confinement to communication. On the other hand, the faith in talking and openness, and its strong links to personal well being and happiness, are so insistently made that they also invite another kind of reading. We see this pre-occupation as deeply implicated in the project of freedom of the self, and in the rise of the therapeutic in every day ways. We do not regard as an ‘ideology’ duping people, but as providing resources for making oneself and for building a life. The quest for happiness seems so important in a culture of the self, and of reflexive biographies, because the dissolution of traditional roles and futures and the opening up of choice, places the opportunity for happiness as an individual and individualised quest.

‘To cut a long story short: for most of human history happiness was not the self-evident purpose of life’ writes Bauman (2002, p.138). ‘If anything, the contrary assumption prevailed. Suffering and pain were seen as permanent companions of life. Wishing them away would be vain, and trying to evict them an act of conceit — counterproductive as well as dangerous’ (Bauman, 2002, p.138). In the contemporary culture of the self, by contrast, happiness is a regular pursuit, the ‘self-evident purpose’ of a good life. As with Rose’s dictum ‘obliged to be free’, we might now say that we are also ‘obliged to be happy’.

We might regard the desire for happiness as a slight ambition, dismiss it as peripheral to the ‘real’ matters of daily existence. But what other ways might there be of interpreting the intense concern with happiness? The ‘emotional realm’ (particularly as it is aligned with femininity) has a long history of being hastily denigrated and trivialised, its significance either regarded as self-evident or irrelevant to the ‘main game’. Having an ‘open
relationship’, valuing talk and happiness we see, however, not as vapid desires or trite practices of a stifled femininity or maternity, or of mothers vicariously living their otherwise thwarted ambitions through their daughters. Nor do we see it as evidence only of constrained and limiting aspirations of the socially marginalised, an interpretation that cannot seem to escape condescension (as if happiness is a consolation prize for material deprivation), despite the fact that for many happiness, understood as not being miserable, is indeed a genuine aspiration. Rather, we have argued that these desires and preoccupations are expressions of changing cultural forms and practices of the self, a culture where one is indeed obliged to be free, open and happy.

Reference List


