



Reflections on conversations which 'returned the normalising gaze'

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Normal is a word that has a history in geometry that was applied as a measure of human functioning early in the 19th Century. As has been noted elsewhere the concepts of normal and normality have become taken-for-granted ideas within western culture as if they have an existence independent from their historical and cultural origins. The effects of the 'normalising gaze' have been widely studied. This paper is a description of a therapeutic encounter in which conversations were shared which 'turned the spotlight back on the normalising gaze'. These conversations were shared by Peter and Rosemary. This paper has been written with the hope that other people (both therapists and those consulting therapists) can be inspired to find their own ways to expose and have some fun while returning the normalising gaze.

Key words: narrative therapy, modern power, normalising gaze

BACKGROUND

To question taken for granted everyday ideas is something I have been fascinated by ever since hearing Michael White ask people at a pre-conference workshop, 'has anyone here got psychological needs?' and then reply 'you know, they haven't been around for very long'. Although at that time I had not read about modern power (White, 2004), I now feel I appreciate the 'special kind of joy' Michael White (2004, p.155) said he felt when first reading Foucault, which White associated with returning the normalising gaze, and questioning taken-for-granted ideas.

As a clinical psychologist, my interest in the operations of modern power has a particular relevance, as the 'professional knowledges, discourses and practices perpetuated by clinical psychology amongst other professions are at the 'heartland of modern power' itself (White, 2004). Reading this for the first time was a shock to the system to say the least! It still evokes an intense mixture of sadness and determination. Sadness about the way modern power can unwittingly affect people's lives and identities, and determination to do what I can to use my position within the 'system' to notice and tackle these effects.

It may be useful here to refer to what White described as the importance not to denounce power. Power is in many ways inevitable in human life, in our many relationships and contexts, and is by no means always a detrimental phenomenon. However, it has been argued that power can become a problem when its operations and effects become invisible, or when the effects of modern power are attributed to the person experiencing those effects, rather than the outcome of an interaction (White, 2004, 2007).

THE THERAPY CONTEXT

During the initial therapy sessions, Rosemary described how the abuse she suffered had affected her in many ways. Firstly it led her to blame herself if something went wrong, even when she knew other people or factors were in operation. It also led her to feel detached from others, and to feel 'different' and 'not normal'. Later sessions were predominantly characterised by re-authoring conversations (White, 2007) in which aspects of life that Rosemary placed a great value on were richly described. This included an appreciation of

nature, and birdwatching in particular. As part of this, one session was videotaped and viewed by a colleague who was also a keen birdwatcher, who then provided an outsider- witness response (White, 2007). In addition, the skills Rosemary had which helped her to sustain her connection to her values were also identified, which Rosemary called her 'lifelines'. For example, I had noticed that Rosemary always arrived early for her appointments, sometimes at least 15 minutes prior to the scheduled start of the appointment. Rosemary said she felt her sessions were a place where she did not feel judged, and could enjoy the peace of the waiting room. This formed the start of a conversation about the lifeline of peace in Rosemary's life, and what supported it beyond the psychology waiting room.

HOW IDEAS OF NORMALITY AND MODERN POWER WERE DISCUSSED IN THERAPY

The first time 'modern power' was discussed was in the ninth appointment. The following section includes Peter's and Rosemary's reflections on this conversation:

Peter:

During this session Rosemary asked me the question, 'Am I normal?' This was no rhetorical question: in fact I remember feeling cornered by the question, with no option but to respond. This question clearly placed me in a centred 'expert' position as somebody with the authority and knowledge to make such a judgement. Drawing from the distinction between being centred or decentred whilst remaining influential (White, 2007), I wanted to find a way of decentring myself, despite feeling extremely centred by Rosemary's question. The way I tried to do this was to shift the focus onto the idea of normality itself, and what Rosemary could learn about that, reflecting the title of Hutton's paper - to return the normalising gaze. So rather than responding by saying something like 'Well what is normal anyway?' or 'I suppose its finding what's normal for you', I wanted to give Rosemary the opportunity to reflect on the question itself and the idea of normality, and my response was to ask Rosemary, '*Do you want to know what normal is?*' and '*Would you like to learn about where the idea of normal comes from?*' Rosemary responded enthusiastically to my invitation. I suggested that, if she was interested, she could read an article. I described the article by Jane Hutton (2008), saying that it traces the history of the idea of normality, and how it has come to be a taken-for-granted term in Western culture. I drew her attention to one or two of the drawings, to give her an idea of the

kind of article it was. So what I offered Rosemary was an invitation to join with me in moving the spotlight of modern power within our conversations, as a way to open up space for her to draw conclusions about herself and her life which may not have been possible while under the normalising gaze.

Rosemary:

For most of my life I had felt abnormal by the way I was feeling isolated in my head without feeling anything only anger. I had felt afraid of not doing things 'normally'. This had made it hard for me to make friends or to trust anyone, and had got me into a self-destruct mode, and thinking there must be something wrong with me. I did not feel normal. I had to ask. Peter looked at me for what seemed ages. I wanted to shout 'answer me tell me am I normal'. To my surprise he asked me if I wanted to know what normal was.

In the next session, Rosemary said she had read the article several times. She was very surprised that she was able to maintain her concentration long enough to not only read the article, but to retain what she had read. She described how she began by reading a sentence at a time.

I never realised how profound that was going to be. Being given the opportunity to question the whole idea of 'normal' has helped me in many ways. Jane Hutton's article has become one of my lifelines that I always have nearby to read.

I've been able to reflect upon my place in society as a whole: we are in a society now where we can't survive on our own – we need each other – but we have been normalised: we do judge but what are we basing these judgements on? Who is normal? What does normal actually mean? I have also shared Jane Hutton's paper with friends who have realised it is okay to feel different. We are who we are, providing we don't hurt others we can be ourselves – it is judging others that hurts. If we all were just ourselves no-one need feel judged. We need to feel accepted: 'rejection hurts'.

I've also realised that you don't have to be categorised, and compare yourself, which has enabled me to look at myself – this has had a profound effect. It has also brought things into a different context, by changing the meaning of past events. It seems that by externalising the question itself, it lost its

sting! This questioning the whole idea of normality made it seem funny, whilst at the same time made me feel proud of the person I was. I have found myself wanting to help others under the 'gaze' by sharing the article by Jane Hutton.

I've also begun to notice how much the word normal crops up in conversations, and found ways of resisting it as another way to protect others who might not feel they are fitting in. I can see when people are, usually without realising, talking in normalising and categorising ways about other people. Rather than get angry with them, I just think, 'here we go again', and feel sorry for them, and try to turn the conversation to return the normalising gaze.

THE EFFECTS FOR PETER

To hear from Rosemary how much these conversations and sharing Jane Hutton's article had helped was astounding! I have let Rosemary know that this was a very refreshing experience for me as within my own professional circles it is uncommon to have 'returning the gaze conversations'. The conversations have spurred me on to be on the lookout for further openings in my work. It was particularly striking to witness the ethical position Rosemary appeared to adopt, which motivated her to help others who were subject to the normalising gaze, resist normalising language, and to see the language and system of power as the problem rather than those persons who may be using such language.

Lastly, I also hope that this work was in keeping with Michael White's sentiment around 'increasing the sites of resistance' to modern power (White, 2007). I hope that this paper inspires other therapists, clinical psychologists, social workers and others to find their own ways to expose normalising judgement as a way to 'resurrect diversity' in everyday life (White, 2004).

FINAL WORDS BY ROSEMARY

Let's all hope that the person who thought of the word normal was normal, otherwise we're all stuffed!

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