

# A traumatic intrusion with transgressive possibilities: Power as a relational and discursive phenomenon

Imelda McCarthy

*The true representation of power is not of a big man beating a smaller man or a woman.*

*Power is the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter. This is true in the Pentagon, in marriage, in friendship and in politics.*

Carolyn Heilbrun

## Introduction

Therapy, in one way or other, has always been about subversion – whether it was the undermining of symptoms, the provision of a transitional space for the considering of serious changes in one's life, a space for political conversations with social ramifications or, more recently, the co-creation of a space where the transformation of consciousness might take place. All of these aspects of therapy are about disrupting the habitual, the unseen and the conditioned in our personal and social lives. As such, one could posit that therapy, to be true to its spirit, is transgressive of the taken-for-granted – those conditioned responses which both keep us going and challenge us to transform.<sup>1</sup>

In that way, all change is in part a transgressive act. In our moves to evolve or co-evolve there needs to be a going-beyond a previous positioning (Simon, 2007). This special issue is a celebration of such an evolution and transgressions by many courageous beings in their own small and larger ways of living out a life of difference on the margins. Indeed, this marginal siting cannot be but transgressive as they illuminate that which marginalises in the first place.

This article also relates to a transgression of a small kind. For many years, I had worked with metaphors and experiences of marginalisation, power, gender inequality, abuse and victimisation. These categories seemed quite clear until the intrusion that is described here entered my life and home. What follows is my attempt at deconstructing previous clarities and restorying a lived experience of ambiguities in relation to power and powerlessness.

I will explore a power-saturated and personally traumatic event as a relational enactment. I have chosen to explicate my own experiences this time as, for most presentations and papers, I speak as a professional working with clients who have experienced trauma. However, on this occasion I thought I would take a reverse position and address my own trauma which I first wrote about (for myself) in the immediate aftermath of the event described. A long-standing interest of mine is to have client's accounts of therapy and therapeutic process inscribed in professional thinking. If I ask that they disclose themselves then it is only fitting that I do likewise when relevant.

As a systemic social constructionist therapist I see each telling of this story as another recitation (re-citation) of a self-reflexive contextualised narrative. What I mean by this is that the story, though similar to many other times I have told it, has new meanings both for me and for listeners and now readers each time I tell it. The context in which I tell it also enters the story to reshape it somewhat differently in each telling. In this way, it has been my experience that any singular or over-determined thoughts about the event have been disrupted or I might say transgressed, giving me access to different and complex versions of it and my subsequent 'identity'. I tell this story as many of us work daily with women, men and children who have been traumatised in their lives and have difficulty reconciling the event in their lives. In such work, we become witnesses of these stories and hopefully help our clients to reach a place where hope and joy replace fear and pain as their more dominant experiences. We do this in many ways and I have been fortunate to have had listeners who have brought me through a challenging and reconciling process to a place where I now feel safe again and where joy and hope predominate.

When we as women talk about listening to other women's stories or the stories of the abuse of children, we often privilege women therapists over male therapists as being the most appropriate witnesses of these stories. In many cases this is so but, in my case, I received wonderful help from both men and women. In fact, my experience is that women supportively held me in the aftermath but I also 'protected' them from the details of what happened while my male colleagues brought me through the minutiae of the events. In this regard, I want to acknowledge the support of my dear women friends who are also my colleagues who loved me through the dark moments after my attack, who created ceremonies of candles and lights in clearing my home of fears and who brought forth the symbol of the dolphin as a protective emblem. Now, as you know, many in our field have used the symbol of the dolphin, in particular, Gregory Bateson and my own professional 'Godmother', Lynn Hoffman. Also, in my team work with Nollaig Byrne and Phil Kearney<sup>1</sup>, the dolphin was an important symbol in times of questioning and uncertainty. In addition, I also want to particularly acknowledge men who were

especially helpful, my husband who for two years never left me alone in the house, my Swedish friend and past team mate, Ernst Salamon who took me through the event on two occasions after we had encountered the work of the third man I want to mention, Allan Wade from Vancouver Island in Canada. Briefly, the work of Allan Wade stresses all the little ways in which we resist when we are disrespected, treated badly, abused, attacked or violated physically, sexually, mentally or spiritually. In the accounting of what he refers to as “Small Acts of Living” (Wade, 1997), which are resistances to abuse and trauma, we come to know and realise ourselves differently. We empower ourselves through the knowledge that we did not co-operate with our abusers or attackers but rather resisted them in all the ways which were open to us even within very circumscribed relations of power. I do not think we can talk of trauma, reconciliation and women without addressing the issue of power. As Heilbrun and Wade have said in similar ways, power is premised on the abilities which are available within the parameters of a specific context.

What does this mean in plain English? As I will hope to show, social realities are constructed through narratives. The stories we tell about an event come to constitute that event. If we tell or punctuate the story one way, e.g. ‘A woman was attacked by a man with a hammer’, a social reality is constructed in gender terms from a plot of male power and female powerlessness. If we tell the story in a different way, ‘a woman with a background in systemic thinking and therapy, who is middle class, highly educated and articulate is attacked by a poor, working class man with a hammer, who is a drug addict looking for money to satisfy his desperation’ then the issue of power becomes more complex and dispersed within the relationship and through the narrative.

Thus, in this light and to reiterate, the manner in which you account for an event comes to constitute the social reality or realities you live. If I tell a story of powerlessness as a woman then I live powerlessly, whereas if I tell a story of abilities within the parameters of a specific context, then I can begin to re-constitute myself more ‘power-fully’. I do not see this latter accounting as a mental trick but as a potent ‘force’ in identity construction and a transformation in consciousness. ‘I’ become a different kind of person through the different kinds of telling. As such, I construct ‘power’ in the way I talk about power. In this way I propose power as a discursive and relational phenomenon.

### Narratives of power as rhetorical devices?

If we take this view, then ‘power’ as a ‘thing in itself’ does not exist. However, we have all experienced situations of vulnerability, fear, ‘powerlessness’. When we use the word, ‘fear’, it is always in the context of, “I am afraid of... (something, someone) or “In this place I am afraid”. These statements bring forth questions such as, “What/who are you afraid of in this place? What is triggering this fear?” Fear seen in this way therefore always constitutes a relationship between a person within/to a context (which may be a person, place or object).

Similarly, to state that one is ‘powerless’ has limited meaning unless we elaborate the context, e.g. powerless in the face of what or whom? If we see power or fear as relational then their descriptions thus escape a universalising characterisation of a person as a ‘powerless person’ or ‘fearful person’.

Let me elaborate my own experience as an example of what I mean. I was in my home alone one hot summer’s night some years ago. My husband had gone out with a friend for a few hours.

Although invited, I chose to stay home and pack for holidays, which would commence the following day. At 11.30 pm it was dark and I was watching television when I heard a noise and got up to investigate. Standing at the top of the stairs I saw that the hallway had been disturbed. I quickly realised that I had no way out and retreated to the living room on the first floor to telephone for the police. However, before I could do this, a man had come quickly upstairs, grabbed my by the hair, removed the telephone, thrown me on a sofa and threatened to kill me with the hammer he was carrying. In that moment, I really thought I was going to be killed, raped and/or become HIV infected. My attacker was in a highly agitated state and I reckoned he was a drug addict and knew that such attacks and burglaries are often accompanied by threats of using dirty needles on the crime victim. I remember being in a state of terror but removing my glasses and earrings so that, if I did get beaten, then at least they would not be instruments in the assault.

Events moved into slow motion and it was as if I was observing the scene. While being dragged by my hair down the stairs, I amazingly began to think of Gregory Bateson’s ideas of symmetry and escalation and ‘knew’ that, in that moment, I must not do anything to ‘make things worse’. For example, if I screamed, who would hear me? We were both frightened, my attacker and I. I was aware of his rapid breathing and sweating and so I matched my breathing to his and then slowed my own breathing down and listened for his reaction. I also remember from systemic conversations and supervision with social workers who worked in prisons that “burglars do not want to be seen” as in seeing them one would be able to identify them and so would be a threat to their liberty and to their identity (as a petty burglar). Therefore, I told him I would not look at him when he threatened me.

As this was happening, I also realised that I may be making myself more physically vulnerable as I could not see what he was doing. This recognition gave rise to more serious choices, e.g. a movement from ‘just burglary’ to a crime of grievous bodily harm or even murder. I knew enough to realise that to escalate the situation in any way would risk pushing our fraught relational situation to a very dangerous level. After he had locked the front door of the house, he dragged me back up stairs and asked me about each room. In one room were the packed cases with our holiday money. I told him we had come back from holidays and that I was unpacking. This ‘lie’ would have opened me to serious threat if he had investigated further. He asked if I had money in the house and I said no – another ‘lie’.

Also, as we went up the stairs, I turned on all the lights and also as we entered the living room. My reasoning for this is that the blinds were not drawn and so, with the lights on, he might be seen from the road. He did not seem to notice or object! All the time he was threatening that I would not come out of this alive and that my head was going to be splashed all over the wall. I for my part kept saying as ‘calmly’ as I could that I would not look at him and that he was safe and that I knew he did not want to harm me as that was not his aim. I kept repeating this like a mantra, as much for my own sake as his. The terror never subsided throughout and yet there was part of me that observed everything and made choices along the way. I knew that, within the situation, I could not run for it. I could not restrain him. If my husband returned, he could not get into the house quickly so, the only course left open to me was to use my knowledge of relationships and contexts.





He asked me who the doctor was in the house and I told him I was but that I was not a medical doctor and that my husband was an acupuncturist and did not use drugs. (He had broken in through my husband's treatment room.) He then asked what kind of doctor I was and I said 'social work'. When I had the words out I realised I could have been putting myself more at risk if he had negative feelings about social workers. However, he did not say anything but dragged me up to the bedroom and told me to lie face down on the bed. I did not do this but rather sat on the edge of the bed with my back to him. I again turned on the light but decided not to press the alarm button as, if the alarm went off, we were at the top of the house and I had no way of getting out and I could have made things worse.

All the time I spoke saying I was not looking at him and that he was safe and that I knew he did not want to hurt me. I told him my husband was due back, how he would know when he arrived and how he could get out of the house. He said if anyone came he would kill me first and smash my head in. I said that I did not think he wanted to do that. Then suddenly he began to apologise and say that he was sorry for pulling my hair and frightening me but that he was a drug addict and was very ashamed of what he did to get money. Then he would threaten again and apologise. About 15-20 minutes into the event, I heard Michael arrive and told him again how to leave. He ran from the room and down the stairs whereupon I went and locked myself into the adjoining bedroom. The next door neighbours saw him jumping from a window and called the police who came almost as soon as Michael could enter the house. He got away and was never caught.

In this scenario, we might ask where did power reside? If we use an essentialist view of power then one might say my attacker had all the power in this situation. In the moment, he did apparently have the capacity, if not to kill me then to seriously injure me. One

could say simply, he had the power and I was powerless. I was the victim. Yes, I was a victim in these moments but was I without *any* power? My choices clearly were not the equivalent of his but I had choices none the less as I pointed out. I chose from a repertoire I was 'competent' in – systemic thinking. If my knowledge was of any use, I had to hope it would be useful in this situation. So, even though I was power-less in relation to my attacker for the duration of the attack, I was not power-empty. So, we might now begin to ask what were the parameters of the power in that context in that relationship? What were the constraints and the possibilities within the situation? As you could see, the story I told was a story premised on the abilities which were available to me within the parameters of the specific context of an attack on me in my own home.

However, for a year afterwards I constantly lived in fear and threat. I was anxious, had difficulty sleeping, was stressed and afraid of being alone. I blamed myself for not having any options for 'self defence', for not defending myself physically, for leaving myself so vulnerable to danger. The only thing I could acknowledge was that I did manage the encounter well, mentally. I could see that I remained observant and used my knowledge to the best of my abilities. I could see that I was being self-reflexive to a degree in every moment. I was constantly adjusting myself within the situation so as not to risk further escalation or fear and thus to encourage further injury. For some time afterwards, I had a longing to meet with my attacker and to talk with him. I felt no anger or blame towards him but rather saw him as a victim of poverty and circumstances. However, eventually, I did become extremely angry and felt if I met him I could kill him. I wanted to go out at night time into my garden and 'shoot' anyone who dared to enter. None of this anger or desire for revenge helped. It just kept me locked in anxiety and fear.





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Reconciliation within me did not progress beyond a point of stress management until I met and heard Allan Wade talk about his work. Then, I was taken on three occasions through each of the stages of the attack, twice by Ernst and once by Allan in front of a masters in social work class. I came to see how I had not 'co-operated' with my attacker and how choosing not to physically challenge him was self-preservation, each decision and choice I made could now be seen and acknowledged by me as resistance to his violation of me and my home – the 'lying', the turning on lights, not looking at him, continuously speaking with him and assuring him of HIS safety, not doing what he said, e.g. lying down, not showing him into rooms, matching his breathing and paying attention to my own, constantly observing my own actions and reactions in not escalating the situation and, last but not least, praying. All were acts of reclaiming power within a threatening situation. Each was an attempt to assert my own dignity and to a certain extent his also.

Nowadays, when working with those who have suffered abuses, either long term or once off, I talk with them about their responses in minute detail and begin to build accounts of abilities and resistance (Wade, 2007). My experience is that, like me, those I speak with come to a new realisation of their own worth and dignity and to deconstruct negative ideas and experiences of powerlessness, fear, despair and hopelessness.

In the time that has followed from this event, I have been continuing the exploration of a life beyond conditioned dualities (power/powerlessness; victim/abuser). This could be called my on-going quest in the Space of the Fifth Province.<sup>2</sup> This space is glimpsed and experienced as beyond categories, beyond dualities. It is a place of both/and, a place of ambivalence and ambiguity, a place of uncertainty, a place or province of possibilities. These days that space is experienced within me and around me in my life and

relationships. This too is a transgressive space beyond the confines of some of our conditioned dualities and yet inclusive of them.

To sum up, this article has been just one woman's account of an experience of reconciliation and trauma where 'power' is premised on the abilities which are available within the parameters of a specific context and not on an internal characteristic of an individual.

#### Footnotes

1. This article was originally presented at 12th World Congress of Family Therapy Oslo in June 2000.
2. The author with Dr. Nollaig Byrne and Philip Kearney constituted the Fifth Province Associates, who from 1981 to 1995 developed the Fifth Province Approach.

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