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Feminism, optimism and depressive realism

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Personal journal writing to voice experience is a complex form of inquiry, often related to ethnography. This article critically appreciates depressive realism (DR) from a feminist perspective using personal journal writing. It is argued that second-wave feminist ideas are 'current' and developing again and, in different and creative ways, provide alternatives to DR. Collective action is illustrated in the UK and in international contexts, whether to combat individual depression or in more explicitly political movements. Although there is a case for optimistic thinking, the therapy industry is cited as a gendered area in need of radical review, and a focus for feminist attention.

Keywords: feminist activism; depressive realism; social justice; counselling; therapy

What is my strength that I should hope? (Job, 6:7)

Job's suffering at the hands of an Old Testament Almighty, who is having a bet with Satan, ends happily. The faithful and righteous Job, in spite of losing sons, daughters, health and oxen, finishes up with twice as many children and animals as before.

As an argument for depressive realism (DR), Job's complaints about his days being swifter than a weaver's shuttle and spent without hope are up there with the best of 'life is suffering' Buddhism and failed revolutionary Marxism. Somehow, and perversely, Job's words make me laugh. British comedy series about grumpy old men come to mind when I think about DR. Except, of course, Job's experience is also an example of optimism, as all attachment is optimistic (Berlant, 2011). In spite of his suffering, Job's faith in God remains firm.

This article considers feminist thinking as one way of reflecting on why I'm not committed to DR. I'm genuinely puzzled. DR appeals to my British sense of humour (see *Dismaland*, Banksy's latest art installation, at http://dismaland.co.uk/). DR makes complete sense to me, and especially as an antidote to positive psychology and some of the more fundamentalist humanistic therapies originating in sunny California. And it's not just humanism. Faced with the miracle question of solution-focused therapy and relentless positivity of any therapy leaning that way, I am Job-like in my gloom and irritability. It's as if I'm in one of those holiday camps of the British 1950s, surrounded by grinning Redcoats paid to make sure everyone has a good time. So, as a friend reminds me, the European way is surely more sceptical, negative, darker when compared to the twentieth-century American dream, where

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humanistic theories of actualizing tendencies were born and brought up. Yet, I can't afford DR, and that's genuinely hard to explain.

The arguably naïve and delusional arrangement I've come to with feminist thinking about social justice and some therapeutic practices provides me with a tribe, with connections to other people. Feltham (2015) argues that DR is a more commonly held view among men than among women. Essentialism notwithstanding, I'm going to risk using myself as an example of a woman who can't afford to risk the pessimism of DR. My strength, not just to describe but to delude myself that, joining with others, we might change the world, comes from a continuing energy, an impulse to collective action. There is little logic or even rationality in any of my arguments. Anyway, I prefer fiction to philosophy. At root, perhaps I fear that alignment with any form of DR would sap that motivation to keep going. Surely it can't be down to gender and universal instincts – to biology? There are certainly women, such as antinatalist Sarah Perry, who would be powerful advocates of DR.

In a chapter called 'Epistemic Peers and Cartoon Villains', Perry's (2014) massively learned and well-argued prose does not persuade me to antinatalism. I remember a miserable evening on holiday in Spain with the then husband, taking myself too seriously and talking about not having children. Now, he's long gone and – great blessing – I have two grown-up children. I see their company as a kind of heaven (as Perry, at the very end of the book, describes being married). Although I can't depend on them to care for me should I live too long and become burdensome, that's another argument for the antinatalists. My children are a focus for my unconditionality – that old fashioned kind of love. Also, they have a sense of humour. To me their lives are meaningful. Of course they might not agree with Adrian Mitchell's parody (http://www.morethannuclear.com/2011/11/they-tuck-you-up-by-adrian-mitchell.html):

> They tuck you up
> … Man hands on happiness to man.
> It deepens like a coastal shelf.
> So love your parents all you can
> And have some cheerful kids yourself.

Whether you prefer the original Phillip Larkin or this Adrian Mitchell version, perhaps it is my memories of warm, working class parenting that I can't quite bear to give up to DR. What Perry's brilliant analysis does convince me of is the intrinsically woeful state of prohibition and hypocrisy around those who are caught attempting suicide, or even talking about it. There's a dense argument in a whole section of the book about the ethics, economics and general irrationality should someone prefer to die than to live. Perry is forensic – she refers to the legal and social situation and what happens to those who try to kill themselves and fail in the USA, and most of what she says would apply in the UK.

Job's wife suggests suicide. She says, pragmatically, that Job should curse God and die, and is roundly chastised:

> Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. (Job, 2:10)

I imagine that Job's wife (wives?) had no time for DR and were distracted by conceiving, birthing, supervising servants or caring for children, caring for Job. I imagine the

search for herbs to soothe his boils and other afflictions. Whatever her daily activities, her reasons for advising Job to end it all, she is considered foolish.

It's likely that the Old Testament is not the place to look for feminism's positive influence on women's and men's expectations in the contemporary world. However, many thousands of years later, we know that in spite of the majority of women working outside of the home, the division of labour in terms of childcare and domestic tasks is still tilted towards women keeping much busier than men, distracted with caring for children and the elderly, with housework. Perhaps most women then and now would not have time for thinking about DR. This is an easy swipe, and I'm serious that the distraction (sublimation?) of childcare and housework on top of paid jobs keeps women busier than men. Statistics say so. Second-wave feminist action in the West in the 1960s and 1970s was all about equality, and has changed some things for the better for us all, not just (not even?) for those who identify as women. Now my son, as well as my daughter, could experience the isolation, drudgery and terrifying boredom of being responsible for babies and young children in a cold and wet climate, without the antidote of paid work in a relatively adult and sociable environment. Perhaps I'm less Pollyanna-ish than I first thought?

Feminist thinking and activism

There's some indication, in the Western media at least, that feminism, in all its fragmentation, is mentionable again. It is more complex now, intersectional and informed by trans and queer theories. The language and means of communication have of course moved on. People in their 20s and 30s blog about it. Popular Nigerian novelists do TED talks and write about it, unequivocally based on Nigerian experience. Not just for white women any more, and in fact in the USA black women were always in the forefront of feminist action for social justice – even if the F word wasn't their primary alignment. There was a time, a decade or two, when the 'F' word was 'over'. People now, who argue for equality, economically, socially and politically, still talk about feminisms – plural – different strands. Adichie (2014) pokes fun at those who warn her against feminism, as a white, killjoy, men-hating idea. She chooses to describe herself as a 'Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men … And who likes to wear Lip Gloss And High Heels For Herself And Not For Men' (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXU_qWc).

To be angry about inequality, about rape, whether in Delhi, Lagos or Coventry, is to feel a kind of spontaneous energy. I'm arguing that there is a glimpse here of a mood that is far from depression, which in my personal and professional experience leads to inactivity and isolation, and is the opposite of energy. I'm at risk of confusing DR with depression, and I'm claiming a clear link. That all who identify as female, including transgender women, are welcome on the recent revivals of Reclaim the Night protests is still contentious. Continuing increases in reported violence against those who identify as women are not. Perhaps a return to direct action, joining together with other people to protest, is one of my naïve delusions about social change, and it certainly deflects DR.

Contemporary feminist theorists both challenge and affirm some of my old fashioned second-wave ideas, especially about emotion, or 'affect' as academic writing prefers (Wetherell, 2012). When I march around a Midlands city to reclaim the night, again, it is surely about an emotional response to at best an injustice, and

at worst an atrocity. Current feminist theories about emotion suggest that it is interpreted most productively not as an affective lens on 'truth' or 'reality', but rather as one important (embodied) circuit through which power is felt, imagined, mediated, negotiated or contested. Women are at risk of sexual violence and worse, and may, in their recovery and if they live in the developed world, find themselves a counsellor. Of all the places where any idea of power is inadequately theorized and understood, the therapy industry is most in need of enlightenment.

Lack of feminist infrastructure in counselling and psychotherapy

Feminist thinking and action have seen a resurgence; contemporary feminist social and cultural theories illuminate, but in most cases I see little of this critique or illumination in the world of counselling and psychotherapy. Therapy and feminist thinking seem to be chasms apart, just as political action for social justice and counselling seems to be alarmingly separate. Surely political as well as individual solutions to social problems need to be addressed? This is a wild suggestion that is unwelcome to those students and practitioners who want to help others by starting up – as soon as possible after qualifying – in private practice. It is potentially directive too, of course – a heresy to some who are more fundamentalist. To take a gendered critique to those who earn a living in private practice as therapists, or even to those who, possibly unknowingly, deflect their own anguish by helping others in the third sector, is surely churlish, cynical, wrong-headed.

The massive growth of the talking therapies in the late twentieth century has been interpreted as a response to the fragmentation and failure of the family and the community, a response to the absence of religion and other ways of searching for meaning. Feminist therapist Susie Orbach's critical position (2008) is a rarity. Those who have a coherent view on the way that power operates in society and in the therapy industry are in a minority in my experience (Moloney, 2013). So how can I have stomached being a part of this industry for most of my working life? Most proponents of DR make nonsense of the claims of humanistic therapies, and just about any therapy, and increasingly I can go along with that.

It is said that the person-centred approach (PCA) does least harm in the hands of novice and trainee therapists. Interventions are not the point, nor interpretation, nor techniques. The client knows best and the therapist must trust the process, and the client's actualizing tendency (Rogers, 1951). The actualizing tendency, the focus in the PCA on the individual's autonomy, a belief in their agency to change and to grow, or at least to be self-directing, must surely be for optimists, and has been critiqued for decades (Chantler, 2005).

One prospective student at a recent open evening for a person-centred course said, 'Even reading about the person-centred approach has changed me'. A middle-aged woman, wanting to retrain and about to invest more than a third of her part-time income in fees, she seemed genuine enough to persuade me I might be wrong about not aligning with DR. Where has feminism gone wrong? Her enthusiasm about a future with no guarantees of paid, never mind well-paid, employment and probably years of volunteering ahead, left me wanting to question her goals, her sanity, and certainly suggest she look elsewhere for a career change. Perhaps her motivation is in line with second-wave feminist values. Here is Orbach:

> At one level, our goals were noble enough. Cast by the passions and political language of the 1970s, we identified ourselves with the struggle for liberation. We would work to transform the understanding of mental health issues while providing for new gender conscious theory and practice. (2008, p. 15)

Transformation of understanding of mental health could be argued to be part of feminist achievements – for example feminist critiques of the medicalization of depression, bringing the body into research and practice, and seeking to question and change power imbalances. Equally, an emphasis on emotional literacy as an asset at home and in the workplace has to be a good thing, at least in the UK. Yet, if it's still the case that the vast majority of the applicants for counselling training in the UK identify as female, something has not yet percolated through. Where are all the men who want to help others? Don't they know how distracting it is, how your own despair can fall away, when sitting listening to other people's problems and feeling 'helpful' and powerful?

The Public Feelings Project, reflected in Ann Cvetkovich's Depression Journals, connects a logical and righteous sense of political depression with a personal account of despair (Cvetkovich, 2012). The context is North American, and draws on contemporary feminist and queer cultures. As a feminist of the late 1960s and 1970s, part of a strong movement-based feminism in the UK, I have withstood post-structural disapproval of 'confessional' writing and carried on with a habitual, personal life writing that has seen me through political defeat after personal crisis. So, it's OK to keep a personal journal again now. It also made me smile to read about more contemporary feminists' turn towards crafting for well-being:

> And lest crafting seem pervaded by nostalgia for the past, it is important to note that it belongs to new queer cultures and disability cultures that (along with animal studies) are inventing different ways of being more 'in the body and less in the head'. (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 168)

My old macramé patterns and yellowing crochet hooks are rehabilitated. Yet there is an important shift here for those humanistic practitioners who have not yet politicized their approach. Emotion is collective and public: 'Although schooled to be wary of the confessional … I maintained an attachment to the culture of consciousness raising and an investment in how the expression of emotion can have collective and public impact' (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 7).

The kind of creativity that connects with others, in knitting, singing, dancing, gardening – especially when there's a social rather than entirely solitary pay-off – is another of my naïve delusions about deflecting DR and changing the world. An example follows.

9 August 2014

Aldermaston is a nuclear weapons establishment in the home counties of England. The road signs point discreetly to heavily guarded entrances between the trees, and a perimeter fence, several layers of razor wire thick, is concealed by a high, green hedge. Every year on 9 August the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) calls for a commemoration of the people killed by the nuclear bombing of Nagasaki,

Japan during World War II. This year hundreds of women and some men have knitted and crocheted oblong pieces of wool and sewn them together to form a thick, pink scarf long enough to stretch along the road from one gate to another, nearly eight miles in all. The pink knitting adds a festive edge; some of the people I've travelled with have dyed their hair pink and dug out pink wigs. And it's sunny.

This is a public event. We sing, eat cake, hold ends of parts of the scarf so that children can skip. The police smile and suggest places where we might sit in the shade. I have rediscovered the pleasure of craft, and have knitted in friends' kitchens, at home and with a women's choir week. The knitting/crochet has become a collective attempt to feel good about doing something. There is not much to feel good about in terms of nuclear disarmament: no decrease in UK government spending on weapons will result from this action. The atmosphere, however, is celebratory, energized and not depressed.

When the event closes, the scarf is rolled up and put in the boot of a coach, to be un-picked and sent to refugee camps as cot blankets. Worthy, nothing wasted. This is a kind of good life, a gentle kind of activism. We have not been gassed, kettled, beaten, shot. The most aggressive behaviour came from a homeowner, on whose new turf a small group of pink knitting-holding protestors was standing. His house borders the road. Why someone living within a spit of one of the greatest concentrations of weaponry in Europe would worry about damage to his new lawn made us all laugh. So we are related, connected, part of the group. There is collective energy in the making of the scarf and in the bringing of it to this protest.

This is not high art, and music and the arts are powerful deflectors of DR. Jeanette Winterson claims literature as her salvation:

> The healing power of art is not a rhetorical fantasy. Fighting to keep language, language became my sanity and my strength. It still is, and I know of no pain that art cannot assuage. For some, music, for some pictures, for me, primarily, poetry, whether found in poems or in prose, cuts through noise and hurt, opens the wound to clean it, and then gradually teaches it to heal itself. Wounds need to be taught to heal themselves. (Winterson, 1996, p. 157)

Self-medicating through language served Winterson well, it seems, and she has documented her experience of depression honestly and on television, potentially with powerful public impact. I'm not dismissing the 'high' arts, and I particularly envy those whose expressive art form is collaborative. The dancer and choreographer Akram Khan:

> Art has always been a great source of nourishment for my mind, my body and my heart. Its form is irrelevant, whether it be painting, dancing, singing or acting, because in the end all forms of 'art' are primarily about connecting, communicating, telling stories and emotionally provoking the other. (Khan, 2014)

Neither am I dismissing the fact that there is a high suicide rate among the creative: poets, artists, dancers.

As a DR deflector, free access to the arts works for me. On a bleak northern British summer's (or winter's) day, I can avoid thinking about the certainty of death and the futility of life by finding an exhibition, a concert – some form of 'art' that connects and provokes. I feel part of something.

DR, sex, love and the family

Even Colin Feltham's (2015) exploration of different kinds of darkness admits a rather gendered section on 'Loving, laughing, crying'. In a highly entertaining chapter on getting to Denmark, he explores the longing for a special relationship, love and sex that he suggests the majority of 'us' want. Within the family – the very place where 'we' all, as in the traditional image in Figure 2, should feel safe and protected (happy, even) – the universal story is of something much more brutal. Too often, the family is the site of sexual and other kinds of gendered abuse, violence and misery, rather than a place of sanctuary – for women and girls, anyway. This may sound like an argument for DR, and it clearly is.

Writing this article has educated me towards DR. I learned about Job's poetic complaints at an exhibition of Tessa Beaver's work – a relatively unknown and brilliant British painter and printmaker who took up certain verses in her prints and led me to want to read more. Feltham's irresistible critique of most things I've used for sublimation and distraction has made me think, and laugh a lot – breaking some taboos.

Figure 1. Pink knitting on the wire.

Figure 2. The nuclear family.

I'm all for it. For now, however, I'd prefer to draw on Lauren Berlant's (2011) view of cruel optimism, which has parallels with Buddhist teachings. The idea that it is cruelly optimistic, that the very thing we crave and desire, such as a loving partner, is an obstacle to our flourishing, when in the UK two women a week are killed by partners and ex-partners, seems like serious understatement. The continued hope for intimacy in the conventional nuclear family has to be a kind of madness.

Berlant (2004) argues that for those who don't or can't find their way in the story of the happy family, the single, the queers or something else (p. 286), we need other stories. For women who imagine that a loving partner and children will create the longed-for connection, the secure base, individual therapy has not provided alternatives, but has tended to reinforce the anguish of contradictory expectations.

In the USA and increasingly in the UK, models of intimacy, as seen on television reality shows and in advertising, are steeped in what Faye Weldon called therapism (Weldon, 1999). Veering between sentimentality and nihilism, images of the traditional romance, leading to wedding and family, and its obvious yet uncontested failings, seem to be stuck, even in the LGBT world. Meanwhile, as Weldon and now Berlant and others point out, intimate relationships in various forms of counselling, coaching, reality TV and psychotherapy have developed into big business – for some.

The talking therapies industry, predominantly run by women in the UK, mostly either working voluntarily or in poorly paid and part-time jobs, must be re-thought, re-invented. If DR in any of its forms can contribute to that project, I'll sign up. Increasingly, it is well documented that the individual 'help' offered by the therapy industry is not working, that mental health services in the UK fail those who need them most, in spite of the heroic efforts of people who hang on working in them, or work to challenge them. The draft manifesto for a social materialist psychology of distress makes sense, although it hasn't yet reached the whole new industry of coaching (see http://www.midpsy.org/).

Through a privileged and common mix of hedonism, pragmatism, the arts and humour, I resist DR. Through some irrational, feminist and leftist allegiances, I choose to delude myself that more collective and even enjoyable activities may help to change what is clearly out of kilter. Feminist hope is political and collective (Ahmed, 2004). It looks to the future and to a possibility, against the odds, of a world different from and better than the present – whatever that might mean.

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Jeannie Wright is currently Associate Professor at the University of Malta, teaching and researching in the Department of Counselling. She has been active in feminist and other political activities since the 1960s, and has maintained the habit.

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