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ABUSE OF CHILDREN IN INSTITUTIONAL CARE IN 20TH-CENTURY IRELAND: AN ANALYSIS USING FROMM'S PSYCHOLOGY

The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse found that members of Catholic congregations in Ireland abused children in institutions which they ran on behalf of the State for much of the 20th century. Drawing from Erich Fromm's moral psychology, it is argued that members took out the suppression of their individual freedom in hostility towards the children and themselves through forms of submissive and authoritarian behaviour. This is seen as one probable explanation which affected some members. The reason members suppressed their freedom was to find psychological security through embracing a Catholic theology which emphasised self-abnegation. Poor economic and social conditions are also seen as factors which contributed to members not developing a healthy relation to their own freedom. The article concludes that those who work in caring professions need to have security in their own freedom.

Keywords Ireland; Catholic; abuse; children; suppression; freedom

Introduction

Nearly 10 years following its establishment on a statutory basis the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse produced its report in May 2009. Known as the 'Ryan report', it includes many graphic accounts from adult survivors of emotional, physical and sexual abuse which they had suffered as children in Ireland, in institutions established for their welfare. One thousand and ninety men and women reported being abused in industrial and reformatory schools and other residential settings. The period investigated was from 1914 to 2000. Most of the abuse covered occurred from the mid-1930s to the mid-1970s. By the mid-1970s most of the industrial schools, in which a lot of the abuse happened, had closed, with one remaining open until 1995. The report concluded that physical abuse was systemic and, in institutions for boys, sexual abuse was endemic (6. 10). It found that while sexual abuse was not endemic in girls' institutions, girls were subject to predatory sexual abuse by male employees and outsiders who had contact with them (6. 18). Physical neglect for both boys and girls was constant (6. 31–32) and the commission found the level of emotional abuse 'disturbing' (6. 39).

The State established the institutions, and the children were placed in them by the courts. The main reason for committing children to industrial schools was because they were judged to be 'needy' (3. 05). The children's parents were deemed unable to care for them for poverty or other reasons, which included a child's non-attendance at school. The children's moral welfare, as understood by the Catholic Church, could also be a reason for committal. This included children considered 'illegitimate', that is, born out of wedlock. Committal to an industrial school lasted until the child was 16, and since children 'were often of tender years, they could be there for many years' (3. 34).

Children committed to reformatory schools were those convicted of an offence, such as theft. They could be as young as 12; however children under 15 were usually sent to an industrial school (3. 09). A reformatory school was set up for girls considered 'morally corrupted' because of sexual experiences (3.10).

The State drew up the rules for the institutions and provided for inspections, but handed over both the managing and staffing to Catholic congregations. It was the members of the congregations – brothers, nuns and priests – who carried out the abuse, along with some lay staff and others who had contact with the children.

The argument has been made that, by the standards of the period, with the exception of sexual abuse, the ill-treatment was not out of line with the norm for Irish society as a whole. Corporal punishment was permitted in schools until 1982. Also, members of the orders pointed out that they weren't given any training in childcare (6. 72). However, drawing from records, the Commission rejected the argument. Notably, the Commission found that the rules for running the institutions were not at fault (7. 10). This included rules for administering corporal punishment. The Commission found that the physical and emotional ill-treatment was severe and excessive. The children 'lived with the daily terror of not knowing where the next beating was coming from' (6. 11). Also, we would expect the members to have provided the children at least with their basic needs for nourishment and security as a matter of common humanity. So, if neither the rules nor standards at the time were at fault, this suggests that an explanation may lie internally in the particular psychology at work in those members who abused.

A striking feature of the abuse is that it was mainly carried out by members of religious orders whose beliefs emphasise the precise opposite of the behaviour which members practiced. Core Christian beliefs include values of compassion, care and, indeed, justice for those in need from poverty or other reasons. Their beliefs emphasise valuing each person for his and her individual worth. They believe each child is created in the image and likeness of God, and so deserves to be cherished. So, what went wrong that members of the congregations acted against their own core beliefs? One of the Commission's recommendations is for the congregations 'to examine how their ideals became debased by systemic abuse' (7. 03). This article is an attempt to suggest through moral psychology one probable explanation.

Moral psychology relates to psychological factors that predispose a person to act morally, along with the factors that not only thwart this capacity but predispose a person to act immorally. Drawing from Erich Fromm's work, I suggest that members' fear of their freedom led them to suppress it for the security of a belief system which emphasised self-abnegation to the exclusion of retaining a relation to their individual freedom and rationality. I suggest that it was this suppression which led them to engage in submissive and authoritarian behaviours which included abuse of children.

I am suggesting a *probable* motive for the abuse, for motivation is complex and difficult to attribute accurately to others or oneself. Also, I do not suggest Fromm's existential, psychological insight about individual freedom *on its own* explains all of the motivation that led to the abuse. As Condrón notes, what happened in Irish society had 'many causes' (2009, p. 13). For example, I don't consider paedophilia, which is a likely motive for at least some of the sexual abuse. My purpose is to focus on *one probable* underlying motive on the basis of Fromm's theory.

Child abuse has occurred in many countries, in both institutional and other settings, and abusers have been both clerical and lay people. I am not attempting to understand it as a whole. My focus is on the abuse in Ireland as documented in the Ryan report. However, Catholic clergy with Irish backgrounds are prominent among those who have been involved in child abuse in other English-speaking countries: notably in the US, Canada, Australia and the UK (McGarry, 2002, 2009). Also, the suppression of freedom could be considered a relevant factor that gives rise to abusive, authoritarian behaviour whether or not it involves self-abnegation for the security of a Catholic or another belief system. Self-abnegation in submission to theological beliefs about personal sacrifice might be seen as one emphatic form of suppression.

I am not suggesting that *all* members of the congregations felt a need to suppress their personal freedom in a way that led them to behave abusively. For example, the Commission found that 'many witnesses who complained of abuse nevertheless expressed some positive memories'. These included 'small gestures of kindness' or 'a word of consideration or encouragement, or an act of sympathy or understanding' (6. 07). Also, from her knowledge of the women in religious congregations, Condrón states that they 'gave their lives to the care of the unfortunate whom society had rejected' and that 'the vast majority led exemplary lives' (2009, p. 13). I am suggesting that suppression of freedom was a likely contributory factor only in those members who abused the children. At the same time, I also suggest that it contributed to the abuse being tolerated by others who were reluctant to act to end the practices. Some commentators have pointed to the desire to exercise power over others as the motive (see O'Toole, 2009; Inglis, 2009). The argument is made that if one gives people too much power over the lives of others, and if one does not adequately monitor and supervise them in their roles, it is in human nature that some at least will abuse the power that they have. However, this argument begs the question of why in the first place people feel a need to exercise power abusively when they are in a position to do so. I argue that power can be the means of satisfying an even stronger motive, which is unconscious: the desire to allay anxiety over the uncertainty that arises from the experience of personal freedom. By calling the motive 'unconscious' I am saying that, while abusers would have consciously experienced *the effect* of the relation between the suppression of their freedom and their abuse, they did not *know* that this was the root motive of their behaviour. Had they realised it, they would have been in a position to change.

I am not suggesting that *any* attachment to a belief system to allay the uncertainty of freedom will lead to people using its power to abuse others. Fromm points out that it is the nature of the attachment that is crucial. If the attachment is irrational, by which he means if a person unthinkingly sacrifices his or her own capacity for individual thinking in blind obedience to the demands of the belief system, then there is a substantial risk that he or she will behave in an excessively authoritarian manner, which can include abusing others under his or her power. On the other hand, if a person

makes a rational choice to live a life in submission to what he believes is the will of God, as the deepest expression of the value of his humanity, conscious of his freedom to choose, this obviates his or her need to engage in abusive behaviour as well as enabling him or her to recognise that it is wrong. In particular, it will enable him or her to be conscious that others have an equal freedom, which does not have to result in them choosing the same belief.

I am not, therefore, arguing as Dawkins (2006) and others do, that religious belief is inherently irrational. Fromm maintained (1994, p. 326) that there is no higher power than man and that the realisation of our individuality 'can never be subordinated to purposes which are supposed to have greater dignity'. At the same time, he accepted that the desire itself for union with a power believed to be God is 'by no means irrational' because rational understanding is limited. Rational understanding is unable to account adequately for 'the secret of man and of the universe' (1993, p. 33).

Fromm (1900–1980) was a psychoanalyst associated with the Frankfurt School in its early period. He was influenced by Freud's ideas about repression and the unconscious in response to the sexual drive; and by Marx's idea of individual alienation within an insecure, competitive and powerful capitalist system. Fromm's notable contribution to psychoanalysis was to emphasise the influence of social forces on psychological states. A feature of his extensive work has been the attempt to understand the rise of Nazism and the appeal of fascism along with other forms of authoritarian and self-destructive behaviour. His work is also noted for its existential and humanist foundations.

Fromm's work was well known in the 1960s, although it has since fallen out of favour. Kovel (1994), Funk (1994) and Rasmussen and Salhani (2008) are among those who advocate for the explanatory power of Fromm's insights. Rasmussen and Salhani (2008) provide a valuable overview of his work, and argue that by combining social theory with psychology his insights have much to offer social workers in understanding and helping service users.

Individuation and the problem of freedom

In *Escape from Freedom*, also titled *The Fear of Freedom*, first published in 1941, Fromm describes the process of healthy psychological development in the ability to develop individuality out of 'the primary ties' which bind us in early childhood to our mother (1994, pp. 23–38). The primary ties provide a child with a natural, organic security in a relationship of dependence. Through a loosening of the primary ties, a child grows into a sense of him- or herself as an independent, separate person.

The problem is that the separation process does not normally occur in step with the individual's capacity to adapt to the realisation of his or her freedom. The adolescent's and adult's increasing sense of independence is at the expense of a loss of the original security. As a consequence, a person is caught between the pleasure of increasing autonomy and the pain of loss of security. On the positive side, loss of original security brings a growing sense of personal strength and self-reliance. But, on the negative side, the loss can bring a much stronger feeling of being alone and powerless. This brings a burdensome feeling of uncertainty or doubt from which we seek relief.

Powerful tendencies arise to escape from this kind of freedom into submission or some kind of relationship to man and the world which promises relief from uncertainty, even if it deprives the individual of his freedom.

(1994, pp. 35–36)¹

A parallel historical trend in the West has been our increasing awareness since the Renaissance of our existence as separate individuals who can choose the kind of life we want in terms of the meaning and value we want it to have. This has meant that the separation process is into a world of much greater openness, uncertainty and complexity than any time in history (1994, p. 36–37).

A theology of self-abnegation

For Fromm, Reformation theology led to Christian Churches which offered relief from psychological uncertainty for those who submit to their teachings. He maintains that the Churches themselves emphasised the belief in submitting to the authority of God precisely as a response to the insecurity of individual freedom. The emphasis began with the break-up of the old medieval world order. At that time the middle class began to gain a measure of freedom, but it was an ambiguous freedom. On the one hand: ‘The individual is free *from* the bondage of economic and political ties. He also gains in positive freedom by the active and independent role which he has to play in the new system.’ On the other hand: ‘He is threatened by powerful suprapersonal forces, capital and the market. His relationship to his fellow men, with everyone a potential competitor, has become hostile and estranged; he is free – that is he is alone, isolated, threatened from all sides’ (1994, p. 62). And Fromm concludes: ‘Freedom brought isolation and personal insignificance more than strength and confidence’ (1994, p. 100). Fromm sees the Reformation as a response to that uncertainty and insignificance. It led to an emphasis on renouncing individual freedom in self-surrender to God, which provided relief from the uncertainty while providing for a sense of ultimate personal significance in being among God’s chosen (1994, p. 81). A feature of Calvin’s theology, which became important in Anglo-Saxon countries, was its emphasis on moral effort through unrelenting activity. And Fromm sees this also as driven by an underlying compulsion to escape anxiety over the uncertainty of freedom (1994, pp. 84, 91).

A problem develops in particular in those who commit themselves to the belief system in a way that suppress their freedom, and who then experience the restriction from the suppression as a threat to their very existence. Such people end up experiencing hostility. ‘Anybody who is thwarted in emotional and sensual expression and who is also threatened in his very existence will normally react with hostility . . . (1994, 94). However, this hostility is not directed towards removing the factors that led to the suppression. This is because of feelings of inability or powerlessness before the authority of the Church and belief in the divine truth of its teachings. Those affected are caught in a bind. The very course of action they need to take conflicts with their deeply held belief. As a result, they turn their hostility at being blocked from expressing their freedom inwards against themselves. This produces in them feelings of resentment and hatred against a world which they feel has disempowered them and also self-hatred from their own failure. And these are feelings which they are then liable to vent on others. Fromm says of both Luther and Calvin:

What they consciously had in mind was certainly nothing but an extreme degree of humility. But to anybody familiar with the psychological mechanisms of self-accusation and self-humiliation there can be no doubt that this kind of “humility” is rooted in a violent hatred which, for some reason or other, is blocked from being directed towards the world outside and operates against one’s own self.
(1994, p. 97)²

In relation specifically to Catholic theology and teaching, Fromm acknowledges that in the late Middle Ages the Schoolmen ‘stressed the positive meaning of freedom, man’s share in the determination of his fate, his strength, his dignity, and the freedom of his will’ (1994, p. 100). However, he maintains that such ‘dogmatic subtleties’ were not of interest to the poor and the oppressed compared with their unconscious need to seek relief from the burden of their freedom. And so within Catholic religious movements an emphasis also came to be placed on teaching humility and submission, teachings which had particular psychological appeal for both those from poor backgrounds who preached the Catholic message and those who received it. The teachings answered to their anxiety about their freedom in their position of powerlessness by enabling them to feel they had a certain power.

In essence, in Fromm’s analysis, people within the Christian religions were made to feel ‘that they *ought* to feel as they felt’, that is, as insecure and impotent; they were made to feel that these feelings belonged to them as their own weakness in the face of God’s omnipotence (Fromm, 1994, p. 101). They were taught to believe that their true strength lay in renouncing their freedom in service to God. He sums up the practical effect of the theology in the view that ‘a person’s own happiness was not considered to be the aim of life but where he became a means, an adjunct, to ends beyond him, of an all-powerful God . . .’ (Fromm, 1982, p.121). And with God as the authority, not only does this relieve a person of the problem of his freedom but he gets a compensatory sense of power. This comes not only from belonging to a major social group with the same belief, but in knowing ‘he could be loved by God and could at least hope to belong to those whom God had decided to save’ (Fromm, 1994, p. 101).

Faith formation in Catholicism in Ireland during the period of the abuse laid stress on self-abnegation, and it reinforced the tendency to seek relief from the burden of freedom through submission. Condrón (2009) points to the emphasis on this aspect of Catholic belief as a distorted theology, and she sees it as the key factor in why the abuse occurred. The distortion stressed unworthiness to the neglect or exclusion of other, more positive values of Christianity such as Christian love, understanding and forgiveness. For her, the emphasis led to a ‘theology of sacrifice’, rather than one of liberation and mercy, a theology ‘now considered responsible for “redemptive violence”’ (Condrón, 2009, p. 13). The belief led to a stress on self-sacrifice, obedience and humility as virtues: virtues which the religious imposed as requirements on the children in their care.

The need for security in submitting to authority also makes it more likely that believers will have uncritical acceptance of the Church’s directions rather than rely on their own judgement. Moreover, obedience was, and is, one of the vows taken. One Christian Brother described obedience as ‘an internal resignation of your will to the will of your superior’ (6. 69). The effect of such a level of obedience on conditions in the institutions was twofold. First, it meant that the care philosophy which the religious applied to the children was based on inculcating in them a similar level of obedience,

along with other vows of chastity and poverty 'for the good of their souls, and for the good of society as a whole' (6. 112). Second, the Commission links obedience with the reluctance of members to report practices towards children which they recognised as unacceptable, or even to suggest more humane ways of caring for them (6. 98). It helps explain, in particular, why severe physical punishment came to be seen as a norm which could not be challenged.

The obedience was not, as it should have been, to the rules for running the institutions. Nor was it to Catholic theology in terms of its messages of either liberation or compassion. It was to a distorted theology of sacrifice, embraced because it allayed anxiety about person freedom through submission.

Economic and social factors

Fromm emphasises that the process of successful individuation depends on people being able to benefit from supportive economic, social and political conditions. If someone grows up restricted by these conditions, his or her sense of freedom is likely to remain a burden (Fromm, 1994, p. 35). Economic and social factors in 20th-century Ireland contributed to a sense of powerlessness, notably up to the 1960s when conditions began to change slowly. Opportunities for employment and personal and social development were limited. Joining a religious order was one way of avoiding what for many was the only alternative to unemployment: emigration. Also, families were large. Condrón (2009) makes the point that many of those who entered the religious orders were from large, poor families. The Commission points out that those who joined the Christian Brothers, one of the main orders involved, were recruited in their early teens, often as young as 14 (6. 64).

For much of the 20th century, personal and social life in Ireland was confined largely to the Catholic understanding of how a person should live. This would have made it difficult for intending and existing members of congregations to develop a relationship with their own sense of personal freedom independently of Catholic teaching. Catholic teaching was maintained by expected devotional practices. Laws relating to the censorship of books and films also played a part. In *Moral Monopoly: the Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Ireland*, Inglis (1998) traces the historical development of the power of the Catholic Church which saw it involved directly not only in the provision of institutional care but also in healthcare and social services. He also shows how the Church's morality had a monopoly of all aspects of personal and social life. He examines in detail how conformity to Church teaching was brought about through 'a systematic process of socialization exercised in churches, schools, hospitals and homes' (Inglis, 1998, p. 64). He concludes that, through its control of education in particular, the Church was 'slow to accept or encourage criticism'; it 'demanded reverence and obedience' (Inglis, 1998, pp. 2–3). Such was the Church's power that the Commission found that a 'deferential and submissive attitude' towards the congregations compromised the Department of Education in its duty to inspect and monitor the institutions properly (6. 01).

Church monopoly of morality was exercised especially over sexuality. A core sense of individual freedom and power comes from a person developing an informed view about his or her sexuality and having a safe and supportive culture in which to express it

when he or she chooses to do so. However, the Church placed emphasis on condemning as sinful both sexual activity outside marriage and the use of contraceptives. It wasn't until 1980 that contraceptives first became legally available in Ireland. At the same time, there was a taboo on educating people openly about sexuality. It wasn't until 1995 that the State introduced a Relationships and Sexuality programme for all secondary schools.

This meant that those who joined the congregations at a young age would have had little opportunity to develop a mature relationship to their sexuality. For some members, submission to the celibacy requirement is likely to have led to an unhealthy repression of their freedom to have and enjoy normal sexual desire, a repression which was then discharged through abuse. To combat sexual desire, Condrón (2009) and Beresford (2009), who was a victim of the abuse, refer to a practice of self-flagellation known as 'the discipline'. Condrón writes of the damage to self-esteem that this, and other practices of self-mortification, would have had on members, with consequent knock-on effects in relating to children in ways that damaged the children's self-esteem. For Beresford, the practice contributed to a preoccupation with stamping out signs of interest in, or expression of, sexual desire among the children as well as a sadomasochistic motivation behind the violence and the rapes.

Depressed economic and social conditions are likely to have contributed to at least some if not many young people joining the congregations and embarking on a religious life, which they may not otherwise have chosen and for which they were unsuited. The conditions meant that individuals were restricted in developing an open, reflective and critically aware relationship to their own sense of personal freedom from which they could make informed choices about how they would like to live and to grow. While joining a congregation would have relieved them of the burden of knowing what to do with their freedom, it was at a cost: the cost of suppressing it in submission to the prevailing dominance of Catholic cultural understanding and teaching. Also, given the dominance of Catholic Church, on joining they would already have been inculcated into accepting Church authority with its emphasis on teaching self-abnegation rather than a culture which supported and encouraged them to use their own feelings and thoughts in making judgements.³

Authoritarianism

The suppression of individual freedom for security through submission to an authority can lead to authoritarian behaviour. Authoritarian behaviour takes two forms: submission and dominance. Significantly, both tendencies 'exist in varying degrees in normal and neurotic persons respectively', and also they 'are regularly to be found in the same type of characters' (Fromm, 1994, pp. 141–142). As both tendencies exist in all people, this makes it all the more likely that some people will express either or both tendencies excessively, at least on occasions. But it is in particular when people suppress their freedom for the security of an authority that such behaviour can develop into an overriding pattern which leads them to act neurotically and inflict harm on themselves and others.

For submissive (or masochistic) people, 'Life, as a whole, is felt ... as something overwhelmingly powerful, which they cannot master or control' (1994, p. 141). They have particular need for security against 'the torture of doubt' (1994, p. 154). As a result,

they subdue their sense of individual freedom through embracing an authority they perceive as greater than them and that offers security. They suppress their own real needs and desires and are prepared to accept and implement whatever demands they believe the authority requires of them. They put themselves in the power of others to escape the doubt which they experience as worse than submission. At the same time, those who submit in this way often consciously rationalise their behaviour as, for example, self-sacrifice for others, obedience or loyalty (1994, p. 159). If, then, they have responsibility for children in care, their submission is likely to play out in binding the children also to submit to the authority through rigid adherence to required practices: practices informed by a self-abnegation. Also, as mentioned, in their loss of individual freedom lies the danger of experiencing it as a threat to their very existence, leading them to react with hostility. At the very least, the loss will reduce their capacity to respond in a more personal manner, since an essential part of what it means to be a person has been compromised.

An abnormal authoritarian tendency, on the other hand, is directly evident in abusers through their domineering behaviour. Fromm identifies three characteristics of the behaviour practiced by those with a need to dominate others, which can coexist to different degrees. One is their need for power to make others subject to, and dependent upon, their will. The second is to exploit them for particular gain, such as for their labour or means of sexual gratification. And the third is to make them suffer and to see them suffering, physically and mentally (1994, p. 143).

All three characteristics of domineering behaviour are evident in the detailed abuse revealed in the Commission's report. There is the persistent infliction of physical, emotional and sexual suffering as well as the exploitation of children for their labour. Even normal, wilful behaviour can come to be interpreted as insubordination which is not to be tolerated. As Ruddick points out in the context of the family, dominance is about maintaining control and dominant people are often provoked into assault by expressions of 'embodied wilfulness' on the part of those they dominate (1995, pp. 213–217). Children are naturally precocious and unsure of boundaries. Signs of the children being forward or challenging would at some level have been a painful reminder to members of the fact that they had suppressed own freedom and provoked them into taking out their loss on the children. In effect, domineering insistence on behavioural requirements is the means by which members would have tried to block out their loss. Conformity to requirements provides for security; whereas open, free and supportive relations with those under a person's power come to be seen as a threat to that security. In this way, those holding power seek to control those over whom they have power, and they are liable to do so to an extent that includes abusing them.

The domineering person, too, will also often try to rationalise his or her behaviour as a means of justifying it. He or she may, for example, assure him- or herself that he or she knows best what is 'good' for others and become fixated on implementing it. We should remember that for the members of the orders, their religious beliefs were held to contain the truth about life and so to be in the best interests of the children. The strict requirements imposed on the children for humility, obedience and self-sacrifice would have been bound up in their minds with the means of saving the children's immortal souls. This could only have added to the rigidity with which they sought to maintain control and would have provided a distorted rationale for the abuse.

The domineering, sadistic person is not essentially seeking pleasure from inflicting pain, nor is the submissive person essentially enjoying being subservient.

'Psychologically ... both tendencies are the outcomes of one basic need, springing from the inability to bear the isolation and weakness of one's own self' (Fromm, 1994, p. 156).

Fromm also points out that a characteristic of people who express either or both tendencies abnormally is an obsession with power, with people and institutions that have it and those that don't. Power is looked up to and admired and lack of power is despised (Fromm, 1994, p. 171). The children came mainly from poor backgrounds with little or no parental support, and support was discouraged (6. 42). Their very lack of power contributed to the authoritarian way they were treated. This included being deprived of a proper education, especially in academic subjects (6. 36–38).

While Fromm explains that people are liable to turn the deprivation they suffer from their suppressed human freedom inward against themselves in hostility – hostility which they also take out on others – he doesn't put forward a psychological mechanism to explain precisely the unconscious process at work. Klein (1946) developed the influential concept of projective identification. It could be considered an unconscious mechanism by which abusers enforced the anxiety which led them to suppress their freedom into the children as a defence against its pain. Kovel (1994) suggests that the absence in Fromm's work of a particular interpretative mechanism for how the unconscious works, and which could be used in psychoanalytic practice, is one of the reasons why his work has been neglected. However, Kwawer (2002, cited in Rasmussen & Salhani, 2008, p. 219) refers to Fromm's reluctance to develop one in case it would take from consideration of the uniqueness of a patient's experience. And Bacciagaluppi (1989, cited in Rasmussen & Salhani, 2008, p. 219) refers to Fromm's view of analysis as an art.

Authoritarian and humanistic conscience

Conscience is something we carry deep within us. Therefore, it makes for a particularly effective regulator of behaviour. Fromm distinguishes two types, authoritarian and humanistic. Authoritarian conscience is 'the voice of an internalized external authority ...' (Fromm, 1982, pp. 143–144). Authoritarian conscience is formed when a person unquestioningly or unconsciously accepts the commands of the external authority as his or her own. Where the authority is religious, this form of acceptance is one of 'irrational faith', that is, not based on a person's own thinking and feeling, but solely on emotional submission to the teachings and practices of the religion (1985, pp. 100–101). To have internalised unquestioningly self-abnegation before God as a requirement of conscience would have underpinned practices which denied children their individuality. Even when the requirements of the authoritarian conscience are good, a person still lacks development of his or her own conscience. Hence, when wrong practices occur with the appearance of authority conferred on them, he or she is less able to recognise them as wrong and to stand against them and try to bring them to an end.

The second type of conscience is humanistic. Humanistic conscience involves maintaining a sense of personal freedom and of rationality, including the capacity to reflect critically on one's own and other people's behaviour where it conflicts with being a human person. It can only come from 'those principles which we have discovered ourselves as well as those we have learned from others and found to be true'

(1982, p. 159). Fromm is clear it remains open for a person to attend to his or her humanistic conscience. This is because humanistic conscience ‘not only represents the expression of our true selves, it contains also the essence of our moral experience in life’ (1982, p. 159).

Authoritarian conscience can help to explain why there was a failure within the institutions to recognise sufficiently the inhuman practices as wrong, so as to have brought them to an end. It can also be seen as a factor behind why those outside the institutions who became aware of the practices found they were unable or unwilling to take effective action, and as lying behind the wider silence that lasted for a long time surrounding the placing of children in industrial and reformatory schools for their welfare.

Individuality and positive freedom

For Fromm, the challenge is to be able to develop and have security in one’s own ‘positive freedom’ (1994, pp. 255–274). Since the central feature of authoritarianism lies in too great a dependency on the authority of other people for security, to avoid authoritarianism a person needs to develop security based on his or her own thoughts and feelings. A genuine and healthy solution can come only by facing up to the fear of freedom and finding security in independence. This will result in a person valuing his or her own positive freedom as a basis for caring properly for others through recognising and affirming its value for them as well as helping them to develop it.

To bring out the dynamic nature of individual freedom, Fromm uses the word ‘spontaneity’. Spontaneity is ‘the quality of creative activity that can operate in one’s emotional, intellectual and sensuous experiences and in one’s will as well’; it also involves love as its ‘foremost component’ (1994, pp. 257, 259). Fromm is suggesting here that keeping alive a loving relation to our own freedom enables us to respond to others in their subjective experience of their freedom. Genuine love of others has to be based on love of self. Fromm sees terrible damage having been inflicted through the widely disseminated and deeply inculcated view that self-love is selfishness, since the condemnation of self-love as selfishness suppressed ‘spontaneity and the free development of personality’ (1994, pp. 114–116, 1982, pp. 127–133). To love your neighbour as yourself does not mean self-sacrifice for others. It implies that you *do* have love for yourself and that this is a good thing. In having love for yourself, you have it to give. In practice, love of others implies, as well as concern and care for them, responsibility, not as a duty, but in the sense of willingness to respond. Responsibility is ‘a voluntary act; it is my response to the need, expressed or unexpressed, of another human being’ (1993, p. 29).

Conclusion

Fromm’s analysis helps us to understand a probable underlying motive which contributed to the abuse of children in institutional care by members of Catholic religious orders. Fear of freedom led some members to suppress it in an irrational attachment to a theology of self-abnegation. As a result, they acted out their hostility at

being denied an essential part of what it means to be a person. It meant that members who abused, or who accepted it as normal practice, were cut off from the freedom to have an individual, human response to the children in their care.

In the Preface to its report, the Commission notes that the system of placing children in industrial and reformatory schools 'belongs to a different era'. At the same time, the Commission found that 'many of the lessons to be learned from what happened have contemporary application for the protection of children and vulnerable people in our society'. Using Fromm's analysis, the main lesson is a reminder that consciousness experienced as personal freedom presents us with an existential problem or challenge, and that how we respond to the challenge has consequences good or bad for ourselves and others. Fromm also reminds us that there are other sources of authority besides Churches, which can provide for fulfilment, but towards which people also need to retain a sense of their freedom and rationality. This is notably the power and authority of market forces. In *Man for Himself* Fromm writes about 'the market orientation' (1982, pp. 67–82; see also 1994, pp. 105; 106, and especially 'Man in a Capitalist Society' in *The Sane Society* 1991, pp. 76–185). While there were factors specific to the Irish experience of abusing children in care during the 20th century which no longer apply, nevertheless the propensity itself to submit to an external authority as a means of finding relief from the uncertainty of freedom remains a normal feature of human psychology. It is important, then, that social practitioners are well prepared to recognise their own need for security in the light of their freedom and are able to have a developed sense of positive freedom so as to support it in service users. This indicates the need for their education and training to include understanding of psychodynamic and social theory from the perspective of their self-care. It indicates, too, the need to have it as a feature of reflective practice in professional development.

Notes

- 1 There is a striking concordance between Fromm's view of the pressure we experience to suppress our freedom and Sartre's concept of 'bad faith'. For Sartre, the weight of responsibility for our freedom causes us anguish from which we flee by falsely locating our identity in something arbitrary to which we give meaning and value, such as our job role. (See Sartre, 2000, pp. 59–60, 556, 625–628).
- 2 Nietzsche was the first to identify the tendency for people who feel powerless to seek power through subjugating themselves to Christian morality. They then try to impose the morality on others while at the same time feeling resentment against the world that caused them to subjugate their freedom. See *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Nietzsche, 1994).
- 3 See also McGarry (2002, 2009) for the connection between the abuse and historical economic and social factors which contributed to many young Irish males entering the priesthood or joining religious orders and for the repressive effect of the Church's teaching on sexuality.

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