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Graces that bite: *Unleashing the GRR in the graces*

Karen Partridge and Nicola McCarry

We have worked together as trainers and supervisors for many years; first at KCC and now at the Tavistock where we are currently leading the advanced diploma in systemic therapy supervision. We have a core organising-principle in our practice that excites us and binds us together. This is our passionate commitment to addressing inequality and attending to issues of differential power in the critical-therapy and liberation-psychology tradition of many of our respected colleagues, (Freire, 2014; hooks, 1994; Simon, 1998; Afuape & Hughes, 2015).

We have been privileged to be in a position to keep learning from our clients and students and it was whilst working on the social graces (Burnham, 2012) with our group at the Tavistock, that we felt moved to write this article. Working together, we brought into sharp focus the temptation to limit exploration of the graces to aspects of identity, and to ask elegant questions about how these (individual) aspects of identity impact upon the person, the therapeutic relationship and the therapy context. It struck us that this individual emphasis risked removing the teeth from the graces, in the way that young working class people in the East End of London used to have their teeth removed as a twenty-first-birthday present in the hope of avoiding expensive bills and pain later on in life; that is focusing on the individual avoids the pain of confronting inequality and injustice at a higher level. Our understanding is that the intention behind the social graces has more bite and hence greater impact, a way of addressing differential power and a call to action.

We are writing at a time of great political upheaval after the vote for Brexit and the election of President Trump. It strikes us that, over the past decades, we have been lulled into a false state of security that things were vaguely getting better and the battle for equality has dulled, despite the fact that the gap between rich and poor is greater than at any other time. In these times of austerity, the UN claims that UK welfare reforms have led to "grave and systematic violations" of disabled people's rights (BBC News, 2016).

In many ways, the promise of the "life gets better project" (Savage & Miller, 2010) aimed at preventing suicide in lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth, has been partially fulfilled in the UK and Ireland with sweeping legislative changes enshrining equality for their rights; our young people are leading the way in resisting gender and sexuality binaries, although there is still a long way to go. In the USA, let's not forget, a black man sat in the White House for two terms of office. However, the recent political changes with concomitant social impact, together with the forces of hatred and bigotry that have been unleashed, give us the nudge we need for "incitement to riot" in the words of Gail Simon (1998); this call is as pressing today as it was nearly twenty years ago. The recent women's march captures this need to move to action along with the protests such as Black Lives Matter, tragically still necessary. As we write, further protests against the US immigration clampdown are being organised and legislators are challenging through formal structures.

Giving the social graces teeth is a call to social political action to challenge dominant societal-discourses which privilege some groups and marginalise others. The premise that therapy is political is not new; in this article, we want to argue for a consistent positioning on the social graces that includes revealing and deconstructing the invisible societal force-field that is present in each therapeutic encounter. As therapists, if we do not choose to disrupt the unequal world we live in, we perpetuate the status quo and align ourselves with the oppressor. In every session, we must address inequality rather than strengthen people to manage the pain of oppression, however it manifests itself in their everyday lives. Poh Lin Lee (2016) in her work with detainees on Christmas Island states that, with every utterance, we have the choice to ally ourselves with the dominant discourse or to take a position against it. We are hoping to begin to develop the techniques for students and supervisors to make the shift from awareness to action in their application of the social graces.

"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good (wo)men do nothing" (Edmund Burke as quoted by John F. Kennedy)

The GRR in the social graces

As we talked together, weaving episodes and conversations from therapy, supervision and training, we recalled a quiet and thoughtful female Muslim student from KCC who spoke with us about her sense that there was no GRR in the social graces, that race was present but not racism. Adding the 'ism' (which can be argued for every one of the graces), points to the issue of differential power and inequality, to the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. This conversation came back to us in our wish to hone the sharper edge of the graces to create greater social impact in our work.

In our explorations with trainees, we often hear they are afraid of hurting their clients or supervisees, saying the wrong thing or causing offence. We recognise we may hold back in therapeutic conversations because of the therapeutic and human ethic of 'doing no harm'. However, this temerity is the equivalent of having teeth but leaving them in a cup on the draining board as my grandmother used to do (Karen). We are helped in our responses to trainees by the exhortation to be "clumsy not clever" (Burnham & Harris, 1996) in the pursuit of graceful conversations and relational risk-taking (Mason, 2005). As white female therapists, we argue from our own experience that we can be guilty of greater injustice in failing to explore what may be crucial to the therapy; through protecting our white privilege comfort-levels, we blunt our systemic edge. Ken Hardy, an African American family therapist and academic, illustrates this from his perspective:

I get frustrated because I think that sometimes privileged folks, whether it's men, or white people or heterosexuals, seem to require a manual before they will take action. They want to know how to approach these issues in 'the right way', a way that involves the least amount of risk to them. ...This is not true for people in subjugated

positions. We are familiar with the feeling of not knowing what to do. We are used to facing hostility and anger when we step into unfamiliar territory. If relationships across difference are to be healed then people of privilege cannot turn away at their first experience of rejection or hostility (2001).

Choosing to be “clumsy not clever” and to “get it wrong and ask” and then invite our clients to reflect on this, are important therapeutic positions linked to relational reflexivity (Burnham, *et al.*, 2008). We thought that some further deconstruction of what it would mean to link the graces consistently to societal inequalities would be helpful in enabling a shift from individualised, potentially pathologising, discourses to wider societal discourses which respect the wider ecology (Bateson, 2016).

Learning the hard way

We explored some of our most salient learning experiences with respect to the graces. The Bengali lawyer from Newham, who, many years ago fresh from training, I (Karen) had asked what difference it would make if I was from his culture; his reply, “My dear, if you were from my culture I would consider you most impertinent”, silenced me and I was unable to “go on” in Wittgenstein’s sense, (Shotter, 1995). I had been clumsy but not clever and then got stuck, yet the statement has stayed with me over the years, leading to the rehearsal of many alternative possibilities. Another painful learning experience occurred whilst I was teaching a group of white students using the paper, “A genogram with an attitude” (Halevy, 1998). I began to explore my family history of attitudes to difference, aiming to model transparency as an invitation for students to do the same. Halevy invites us to pick an episode from our past which links to the graces. I had a strong memory of being young, perhaps 11 or 12, and my grandmother telling me the story of her black neighbour offering her some turkey over the back fence. She said, “I knew it was wrong but I just couldn’t bring myself to take it, although it was a lovely piece of meat, because it had touched his black hand”. I remember at the time feeling contorted inside by the awful wrongness of her statement, somehow made worse by her knowledge of it being wrong, yet still saying it. I had never spoken about this ‘unvoiced’ incident, perhaps in the hope that silence would somehow whitewash away the blatant racism. I decided to take a deep breath and share this episode

with my group, who were in turn silenced. I think they were shocked and left similarly contorted inside by the perpetuation of the incident in the absence of any clear action to suggest a way to go on. As a young teenager, I had been unable to resist the racism in my grandmother’s statement; in re-telling it, I was shamed and silenced anew and I had not given my students any means to act in resisting it themselves.

When we discussed Karen’s experience above, I (Nicola) thought she had been brave and was interested in what blocked the learning. We decided to experiment with an adaptation of the training rather than erase the generative opportunities offered by the genogram with attitude. We wondered whether we had inadvertently conjured up attributions of blame for racist attitudes, merely shifting it from individual to family of origin, which was not what we intended. Instead, we wanted students to see how people become caught in oppressive attitudes, which are shaped by societal structures and institutions and filtered through families; as well as taking up our individual and collective **responsibility** for dismantling them. We started to bring newspapers to these sessions and invited students to bring sharp eyes and cut out sections with negative stereotypes and messages about different minority groups. This addition dissolved the paralysis of shame and enabled enthusiastic student-engagement with the topic.

I (Nicola) was working with a single black British woman with a 19-year-old son. She came as she was hoping to engage her son in therapy because she felt at an impasse: she was off work with health issues, money was tight and her son had dropped out of college and become demotivated by smoking cannabis. As we got to know each other, she spoke of a frightening incident at home where she had needed to barricade herself in the bathroom, as she feared he would harm her. She felt he got a look in his eyes that indicated he wasn’t himself and we spoke about how he may be mentally unwell. I was alarmed for her and questioned her about how she protects herself and what kind of planning she could do in the event of this happening again. I wanted to say that she must call 999 to protect herself and felt so bad as a privileged white mother about the differential risks of involving the police when it is a black male teenager.

I said something like, “It feels so difficult to say ‘call the police’ when I know how young

black males can be hurt by the police but it sounds like you need to, because you are in danger”. She answered, “I’ve called the police and they haven’t helped”. We went on to talk about the pain and frustration of needing help for her son but not being able to gain access to it. I commented on how this might be exacerbated by racism; that his struggle may be framed solely as aggression, that he had little reason to trust mental health services and that her voice may not be valued and attended to. This took place not long after the Bennett inquiry, which demonstrated institutional racism in mental health services following the death by restraint of a black man in a psychiatric hospital, after an incident where he was racially insulted.

I was working in adult mental health at the time, in a powerful position of knowing services from the inside. I offered, and she chose, to harness my expertise to get her voice heard. I coached her on how to gain access to services for her son, who to speak to and what language to use. She managed to organise a mental health assessment, but he ran away. Eventually and sadly, he was admitted violently, with police involvement, on a section. Following this, our work focused on interventions into the psychiatric system. I helped her write letters to the consultant psychiatrist and to create strategies for building alliances and constructing a power base as a carer, advocating for her son.

Use of self and humour as antidote

I (Nicola) was supervising a team of four, white, mature women when a new family comprising a teenage boy of 14 and his aunt, arrived for a consultation. He had been brought to therapy for help with anger management and had been excluded from school. The therapist began gently to question about when his anger showed itself and when it didn’t. Behind the screen, I found myself deeply touched by this bright young man, the same age as my son, and was concerned about the anger being located in him. When I heard he had been excluded from school for almost a year, I felt an extraordinary uprising of heat and anger: I was outraged. I wondered what alternative stories were subjugated in the interests of a “single story” of blame (Chimimanda Adichie, 2016). I asked the trainee to widen the questioning and to ask about the school exclusion and who was working towards his

reintegration and who was undermining this. Taking a position of resistance, I could not accept the systemic neglect and pathologising of this child and the denial of his rights to education.

This was a black family and this was a 14-year-old boy. I would not accept for him what I would not accept for my own son. I imagined what my own son might experience in being brought to such a strange setting to work on his anger and thought he would feel afraid, ashamed, and desperate to escape. I thought the numbers and paraphernalia of our systemic setting would seem weird and 'awkward' for a young person. It could even be that we reflected the age, gender and racial profile of teachers in his school, who may have contributed to his exclusion. In the reflecting team, I said, *"I am wondering what on earth he must be thinking. Not only is there a bunch of women working with his family, it's a bunch of white women and to cap it all it's a bunch of old, white women"*. The loud guffaws coming from the young boy and his aunt from behind the screen were priceless and soon joined by ours, in front of the screen. By debunking seriousness and the alien nature of the setting, we found a way to facilitate his capacity to join us and work to resolve the stuck place he had found himself in. The aunt was a lawyer and we spoke of how she could draw on her expertise to influence the situation. We changed the focus of the work from an individual intervention, and the team worked with the system to build momentum towards reintegration, including distinguishing those areas where he had to take action.

Shame as a call to action

What we noticed in our conversations was that shame (Kavner & McNab, 2005) is often the full stop that prevents us (and we think our white students too) from going on in these situations. The risk of shame leads us to hide from the people we work with even before saying anything. As systemic practitioners, we are curious about the social construction of shame and the way it might act to silence dissent and maintain the status quo. We wanted to equip ourselves and our students with tools to take a strong response to shame and other malign positionings to enable them and us to consistently link the social graces to action at a societal and political level. An incident I heard about at work helped me (Karen) to explore this further.

On leaving work and travelling on the tube a colleague was handed a 'Fat Card'.

On one side was the word *"fat"* in large bold print whilst the other side included a diatribe from Overweight Haters Ltd – *"It's really not glandular it's your gluttony,"* ending in, *"We also object that the beautiful pig is used as an insult. You are not a pig. You are a fat, ugly human"*. This incident resonated with me at a deep level. Whilst my colleague is of an average size, I am fat and wondered, if I had been presented with this card, whether I would have been able to act in the elegant way she had done in resisting its effects. I feared that the shame about my own body-size might have silenced me. I wanted to clarify for myself the steps that she had taken which I felt I could learn from. I saw this as an act of malign positioning, which Sabat (2003) explores with respect to older adults suffering with dementia. This malignantly places the person as 'other' and then draws a generalisation to all persons placed in this category and, as the storyline develops, negative characteristics are drawn together to describe the person so positioned and all subsequent behaviour is interpreted in this context. This can be observed on a macro level with respect to the refugee crisis and the perception of refugees in the media and also at a micro level in the micro aggressions of everyday racism.

Allan Wade (2014) states that, wherever there is oppression, there is resistance and he argues for a shift from an effects-based psychology to a response-based psychology, which opens exploration into people's resistance and resilience. It struck me that this idea of *"small acts of resistance"* could help to liberate me from my position of shame, instead of feeling crumpled by *"fat"*, I can shift how I respond and how I can act in the future to such malign positionings, both for myself, my clients and supervisees.

These are the steps I identified my colleague taking in her acts of resistance:

- **Making a statement of position** – *"This doesn't affect me but it could affect others who are struggling with eating issues and confidence"*
- **Creating an audience for the act of resistance** – Tweeting it on social media
- **Locating the individual act of resistance in a wider societal context** – Protest, anti-misogyny, anti-body fascism, feminism
- **Thickening the story of resistance by joining mainstream privileged discourse** – Giving an interview for the *Guardian* newspaper

From a systemic perspective, this can be described as reflexive re-positioning:

- **The ability to reflect on action**
- **and to use those reflections to inform future action**
- **in a way which subverts the dominant discourse**
- **and opens alternative possibilities for how to go on.**

In my (Karen) opening address at the 2016 AFT conference in Brighton, I linked this to the idea of constructive awkwardness, a concept researched by David Naylor who works for the King's Fund on "the duty of candour" or whistle blowing, following the abuse identified in Mid Staffordshire outlined in the Francis report. He interviewed people known for their ability to speak out, to explore what enables some people to do so whilst others are silenced. I thought that constructive awkwardness was a cousin of many systemic ideas we hold dear, such as curiosity, irreverence, self and relational reflexivity, safe uncertainty and authoritative doubt but, like non-violent resistance, it included the action step I was seeking. I wanted to bring constructive awkwardness into the repertoire of systemic therapists and trainers as a way to consistently link the graces to action. This requires systemic therapists, managers and leaders to be adept at identifying and resisting malign positioning in therapy, in work contexts and in organisations and to develop the ability to *"dance between discourses"*, to pivot quickly and elegantly to switch the discourse to open appreciative and enabling positions (Barge, 2016; Partridge, 2016a).

I had the idea of externalising the AWK as a mythical bird with characteristics that embody constructive awkwardness, drawing attention to the skills we need to develop further to add to our systemic repertoire (2016b).

In these times, where societal institutions and authority are being challenged through historical sexual-abuse cases, expenses scandals and, most recently, by the presentation of "alternative facts", it seems more important than ever that we equip ourselves with graces that bite. One way to make the graces bite might be to keep the AWK ever present on our shoulder, like an exotic systemic parrot, symbolising diversity and social justice; reminding us, through a squeeze of the talons and a sharp nip, of the importance of linking to wider discourses and adding an action step to our systemic skills to create change.

- A strong bite to make a difference
- Inquisitive sociable nature to foster curiosity and connection
- Sharp but delicate beak to pick apart dominant discourses
- Swivelling neck to turn back on itself to see things from a new angle to enhance creativity
- Vibrant plumage to honour culture and diversity, multi-coloured for imagination
- Long, strong legs to pivot in small places
- Large claws to kick over the traces, to subvert the taken-for-granted and to creat space for alternative stories
- Sharp heel spurs to dig in and resist injustice



- Rich stories of identity
- Beady eye to notice micro aggressions and to seek out rich stories or identity
- Sensitive ears to seek out subjugated discourses
- An alerting call to find mates and to signal the need for action
- Strong wings to soar into observer positions and to create new and different contexts for action
 - Long tail feathers to help with balance and agility
- Wide foot span to tread lightly
- Protective feathers for lightness of touch, gentleness and buoyancy to catch the air streams of uncertainty
- Strong talons to grasp small ledges to remain at the leading edge

An AWK for our time

Postscript

In the spirit of irreverence, birds don't actually have teeth; they use their beaks and digestive tracts to do the job instead!

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Karen Partridge (left) and Nicola McCarry