

## **“Aesthetic Disclosure” An Educator Reimagines Confession**

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By now Michel Foucault’s formulations about sexuality—the discursive constructions of sex—are well known. Yet, despite the fact that confession figures prominently in his genealogy about the manufacture and normalization of “natural” sexual identities, his theory of confession has received far less rigorous study. It generally is conceded that Foucault’s problematization of confession has offered valuable insights as to the inherent dangers arising from the power relationships that imbue confessional institutions and techniques, an assessment with which I concur. Certainly, his analyses have challenged Western society’s unexamined assumptions about the curative and liberatory properties of confession. However, in this article I argue that Foucault’s apparent oblivion about the effects of gender in confessional discourse hides flaws in his confessional theory. When gender is taken into account, several of his conclusions warrant skepticism.

I contend that Foucault’s confessional theory begs attention since it serves as the cornice piece of his panoptic vision of domination that implicates not only religion, psychiatry, medicine, and jurisprudence, but also education. The need to reexamine his claims, charges, and conclusions is not solely a philosophical concern, but a practical issue facing teachers in schools and universities, community centers and religious institutions. Therefore, in this article I suggest that educators must think about confession in ways that avoid both the pitfalls uncovered by Foucault’s deconstructive analysis and the gendered consequences that his patriarchal perspective failed to reveal. To that end, I will concep-

tualize “aesthetic disclosure,” a gender-sensitive approach for dealing with students’ self-revelations that subverts the power relations exposed in Foucault’s confessional theory and offers opportunities for rhetorical agency and artistic self-fashioning.

### **Foucault’s Confessional Dilemma**

Foucault argued that Western society is thoroughly saturated with confession: religious, legal, medical, and psychiatric. Social scientists and psychotherapists have maintained that secrets in themselves are discreditable, that what people conceal is what they regard as shameful or undesirable (See Jung, 2008, pp. 31-35; Bok, 1989, pp. 8-10). Foucault concluded:

We have . . . become a singularly confessing society. . . .one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell. One confesses in public and in private, to one’s parents, one’s educators, one’s doctor, to those one loves. . .” (Foucault, 1990, p. 59)

Foucault charges that individuals’ “felt” need to confess, as well as the “felt” benefits from having done so, have been ingrained in us as members of Western societies beginning with the Christian confessional, continuing through the rise of nineteenth and twentieth century psychiatry, and emerging in today’s media-centered culture. We Westerners, according to Foucault, have come to believe that truth is lodged in our most secret nature and that articulating those secrets produces freedom. And, of course, since sex has been a privileged theme of both the Christian and psychiatric confessional, revealing sexual matters has come to be seen as that which will most completely allow one’s true self to surface (Foucault, 1990, pp. 60-63).

Foucault further contends that we no longer perceive the obligation to confess as a power that constrains us. Rather, it seems to us that disclosing our secrets produces a kind of liberation. Foucault insists, however, that we are mistaken if we are taken in by the ruse that all these voices urging confession are speaking of freedom, for confession is a ritual of discourse that unfolds within a power relationship. One does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a listener who is not simply the interlocutor, but also the authority who requires, prescribes, or appreciates the confession and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, or reconcile (Foucault, 1990, p. 60). Both the one who confesses, to whom I will refer as the confessant, and the one who hears the confession, to whom I refer as the confessor, operate within a web of power relations that crystallize in institutions: the state apparatus, the legal system, and various social hegemonies. These power

relations do not simply repress action, but also operate to produce the subjectified subject (Foucault, 1990, pp. 92-93). By internalizing expert discourse—discourse that was built upon the case studies of our innermost secrets—we believe that we are finding our “true selves.” Having told our secrets to medical, psychiatric, legal, and religious experts, we then define and label ourselves with their power-laden assessments and terminology and hate in ourselves anything that contravenes what those experts have established as “normal,” “natural,” and “healthy.” Thus, expert discourse becomes an effective means of social control.

Foucault’s vision of domination, then, is not a scenario wherein dominant groups wield power over subordinate groups, but an apparatus of states and institutions, built on a network of practices and technologies in which actions bear upon actions. We become complicit in the process of our own subjectification first by confessing our secrets to these various experts, and second, by internalizing the norms that are fed back to us from the experts who have used the pains and passions of our innermost secrets as raw data.

As important as Foucault’s insights are, they also leave one with little hope of agency. Confessants and confessors alike appear to be entangled and enveloped in a web of power relations from which there is no chance of escape. I argue, however, that a gender-sensitive reading of Foucault’s confessional theory reveals faults in his logic. Furthermore, once those flaws are exposed, it becomes possible not only to avoid many of the pitfalls that Foucault believed to be inherent in confession, but also to transform such exchanges into opportunities for encouraging, rather than denying, agency.

### **The Gender-Blind and Gender-Bound Foucault**

Foucault’s work sought to expose and resist normalization and the social hegemonies that restrict individual freedom. However, some of his rhetorical strategies are arguably as patriarchal as the institutions he critiques. I suggest that Foucault’s gender-blind patriarchal perspective hobbled his deconstruction of confession, creating three faulty conclusions.

First, even as Foucault details the ways in which confessional techniques define and stigmatize individuals’ lives, his masculinist rhetoric trivializes much of the harm done to women and girls. For example, in volume one of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault sought to demonstrate how sexuality has been brought under the auspices of psychiatric, medical, and legal discourse through confessional techniques. To this end, Foucault related an incident from nineteenth century France in which

a farmhand was turned in to authorities for sexually molesting a small girl. Foucault described the situation as follows: “At the border of a field, he had obtained a few caresses from a little girl, just as he had done before and seen done by the village urchins round about him. . . .” He further explained: “. . . this village halfwit . . . [gave] a few pennies to the little girls for favors the older ones refused him.” Foucault’s assessment of the situation asserts that it was merely “barely furtive pleasures between simple-minded adults and alert children. . . .” (Foucault, 1990, pp. 31-32).

Foucault’s account of this incident, I argue, is both elitist and patriarchal. Not only did he unsympathetically characterize the adult as a “half-wit” and the little girl as “alert” or “precocious,” but he assumed that the little girl was unharmed and that her participation in this “game” was completely uncoerced. If that was the case, why was there a need to exchange “a few pennies” for the girl’s participation?

Furthermore, in this depiction of an adult male paying a young girl for sex, what did Foucault see as significant?

The pettiness of it all; the fact that this everyday occurrence in the life of village sexuality, these inconsequential bucolic pleasures, could become, from a certain time, the object not only of collective intolerance but of a judicial action, a medical intervention, a careful clinical examination, and an entire theoretical elaboration. (Foucault, 1990, p. 31)

His comments suggest that the “expert” responses in this case, both judicial and medical, far exceeded the significance of the event.

Foucault’s remarks indicate his desire to unsettle any smug assumptions on the part of his readers that we can presume to understand the emotional nature of this sexual experience for either the man or the young girl. But neither can Foucault! In labeling the episode “petty” and “inconsequential,” then dismissing it as an “an everyday occurrence” and an example of simple “bucolic pleasures,” Foucault privileges a masculinist, heterosexualized reading of the events—a reading which completely silences the little girl’s point of view.<sup>1</sup>

Foucault demonstrates his gender blindness in a second way. Discussing the confessional dyad, Foucault is quick to point out that confessional discourse is saturated with power relations. However, while Foucault’s confessor and confessant roles are presented as universal types, in fact, he visualized both as male, assuming that the effects of confession on confessant and confessor are universal. The confessional roles, however, are gendered from the outset. That is, while both sexes may confess, only one sex (male) may ever serve as the confessor (religious, psychiatric, medical, and juridical) who interrogates, interpellates, analyzes,

explicates, coerces, chastises, defines, describes, prescribes, punishes, absolves, or withholds absolution.

In addition, although Foucault characterizes his confessants as a universal type, the preponderance of masculine pronouns in his description is no accident. Foucault contends that, in spite of the power relations inherent within confessional discourse, the confessant feels relief: “[confession] . . . exonerates, redeems, and purifies, him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation” (Foucault, 1990, p. 62). Yet, abundant evidence documents that confessants are overwhelmingly female and that they often have quite different experiences in confession than do their male counterparts.

For example, in Foucault’s foundational confessional institution, the Roman Catholic Church, Church leaders in the late Middle Ages decried the high percentage of female penitents, lamenting “the feminization of the Church,” a phenomenon continuing up to the present day (Haliczer, 1996, p. 33). Further, the existence of special “confessors’ manuals,” which were developed to teach confessors how to coerce women’s *ad seriatim* confessions of their sexual relations, document women’s reticence in revealing sexual secrets to a (male) priest (Haliczer 1996, 34).

The high ratio of female to male confessants, as well as the differential treatment of male and female penitents during confession, has continued into modernity, according to Norberto Valentini and Clara di Meglio. Their qualitative study of religious confession in the Roman Catholic Church reported that priests were far more abrupt, impatient, and prescriptive with female confessants than with male confessants. Valentini and di Meglio also found that the questions that confessors posed to female confessants were decidedly more explicit, probing, and prurient than the questions the same priests posed to male confessants. Confessors pushed female confessants to use concrete anatomical terms and to describe love play in great detail (Valentini & di Meglio, 1974, pp. 12-13). The study suggests that female confessants often found confession to be a far less restorative experience than Foucault’s description purported it to be.

Given that Foucault seemed completely unaware of the gendered differences among religious confessants, it is not surprising that when he turned his attention to psychiatry he was equally oblivious to the patriarchal perspective permeating Freud’s confessional techniques and analysis. For instance, in *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud described in sympathetic terms a twelve year old boy’s anorexia following an incident where a man asked him to perform fellatio in a urinal. Freud observed: “He had run away in terror, and nothing else had happened to him. But he was ill from that instant.” The case was described by Freud and Breuer as an “irruption of sexuality in its crudest form” (Freud & Breuer, 1955, pp. 212-213).

However, in the case study that immediately follows, a seventeen year old girl was labeled “hysterical” after “. . . a young man had attacked her on [a] dark staircase and she had escaped from him with difficulty.” This sexual aggression was, in the words of Freud and Breuer, only one of several “. . . more or less brutal attempts made on her. . . .” Freud’s analysis of the girl’s case, however, quite unlike his reading of the boy’s case, demonstrated little compassion for her situation, even implying that the girl might be somewhat responsible for the attacks because she was “particularly good-looking.” These (male) analysts also believed that the girl “. . . had herself been sexually excited by [the sexual aggressions],” even though they themselves had characterized these attacks as “brutal.” The patriarchal and heterosexist perspective of the analysts produced two very different readings and treatments for these very similar cases (Freud & Breuer, 1955, pp. 212-213). If Foucault noticed that Freud’s psychoanalytic interpretations suffered from a masculinist viewpoint, he failed to mention it.<sup>2</sup>

This issue leads directly into my third point about Foucault’s gender blindness. Foucault claimed that sex is the privileged theme of confession, but he assumed that the confession was a disclosure of the confessant’s own sexual transgressions. He seemed to be unaware of the fact that in many instances women are the “objects,” rather than the subjects, of sexual transgression. That is, both historical and contemporary accounts of religious, psychiatric, and juridical confession reveal that women’s confessions about sexuality are often accounts of sexual offenses committed against them. Their disclosures are attempts to bear witness against violation. Yet, as was the case in Freud’s description of the attack on the seventeen year old girl, accounts of sexual violations frequently are depicted and read as confessions of women’s own transgressions. Furthermore, by subsuming accounts of sexual abuse and violence under the master category of “sex,” Foucault’s confessional theory serves to reinforce structures of gender inequality and domination for those whose need for resistance is the greatest.

Foucault’s confessional theory, then, leaves us in a theoretical quagmire. His problematization of confession has forced us to question our assumptions about the liberatory effects of confession, to view it instead as a ritual of power that normalizes behavior and disciplines transgressive desires. However, it also implicates both confessor and confessant as unthinking pawns caught in an infinitely malleable web of power relations with little hope of resistance or agency.

Furthermore, because Foucault’s theory implicates not only religion, psychiatry, medicine, and jurisprudence, but also educational institutions, the need to reexamine his claims and conclusions is a pressing pedagogical-

cal issue, for willingly or unwillingly teachers participate in rituals of confession by utilizing widely-accepted instructional methods. Teachers experience first-hand what Foucault described as a “singularly confessing society” as students tell their stories during classroom discussions, when writing essays, and while seeking advisement. Yet, Foucault’s analysis implies that sharing of significant experience is weak and submissive whether speaking of pleasure or pain; hopes or dreams; doubt or faith; one’s own transgressions or violence and abuse suffered at the hands of another; and whether confessed to priest or parent; teacher or physician; friend or lover. All confession, he concludes is fraught with danger and saturated with power relations.

We are left, then, with some serious questions. Given that Foucault contends that the act of confession is always a demonstration of power (1990, p. 60), but elsewhere maintains that resistance is always present within power relations (1990, p. 96), is it ever possible for confession to function as resistance? Since Foucault argues that confession is a mechanism for disciplining the desires and behaviors of the subject through a process of normalization (1990, pp. 59-60), can confession ever provide rhetorical agency since he also maintains that one can always refuse normalization and recreate one’s self as a work of art? (1984, pp. 340-362). Is artistry possible only in refusing confession, or could the act of confession itself present opportunities for self-fashioning?

### **Reimagining Confession as “Aesthetic Disclosure”**

I propose that artistic re-creation may be possible not in, but through confession. Certainly, if such an approach is possible, it must heed Foucault’s cautions. As important as it is for us to scrutinize our complicity in acts that reinforce social hegemonies, it is also crucial that we reimagine the confessional episode in ways that overcome Foucault’s skewed conclusions.

To do so, I suggest that three issues must be addressed. First, confessional dialogue must be reconstructed in ways that refuse the power dynamics inherent in the confessor-confessant relationship. Foucault claimed that resistance is always present within power relations and that refusals are always possible. He further maintained that even seemingly intransigent institutions are vulnerable to resistance as persistent and discontinuous refusals chip away at inflexible ideologies. Reconstructing the confessor-confessant relationship to refuse inherent power dynamics will never be a “once for all” act. It will require unrelenting watchfulness and resourcefulness.



Second, confession must be treated as a conduit for artful action, rather than an end in itself. It should offer opportunities for agency by contesting authorized vantage points and utilizing contradictory narratives (Bernstein, 1997, p. 32). Especially when confession is imbricated with testimony about discourtesy, abuse, violence, or more vast social inequities, the disclosure must find life beyond the confessional moment in order to refuse normalization and resist social hegemonies.

Third, in order for either of the first two points to be effective, confession must be extricated from its association with the confession box. It needs a new metaphor. Although metaphor typically is viewed as only a poetic device, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have argued that our entire conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical. They further argue that these metaphors so govern our everyday functioning that, were we to change the metaphors that shape basic cultural concepts, we would fundamentally change the concept itself (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, pp. 3-6). Therefore, in order to reimagine confession, the metaphor of confession must be transformed. The metaphor “confession is the confession box” has anesthetized our imaginations. It must be unfettered from its religious connections. We must be done with the confession box and all that it entails: its whispers, seal of secrecy, and privacy screen. Away with the prescriptive, all-knowing confessor! Let us refuse the docile confessant accepting her penance for the hope of absolution! In fact, let us rid ourselves of the term “confession” altogether.

I propose reframing “confession” as “aesthetic disclosure,” an approach that scuttles the metaphor of the confession box in favor of the language of improvisational drama. This process of reimagining requires both skill and art and holds out the hope of rhetorical agency. Drawing upon pragmatist aesthetics, in what follows I describe a process focused on growth broadly construed. It is imminently practical. This process has identifiable phases and I will treat them in a linear fashion in order to explain them, but it is important to understand that these phases actually overlap and circle back until the process comes to satisfactory completion.

Disequilibrium instigates the process of students’ disclosures. Our students’ disequilibrium can result from traumatic experiences, new and troubling information, or even the examination of heretofore unexplored assumptions, beliefs, and values. Foucault has claimed that the response to troubling intellectual or emotional situations is the desire to confess “whatever is most difficult to tell” (Foucault, 1990, p. 59). Disequilibrium, then, tends to prompt our students’ disclosures.

As Foucault emphasized, all such disclosures, whether they might be labeled “confession” or “testimony,” are saturated with power relations.



Consequently, when the narrator of the disclosure, Foucault's confessant, engages the listener, Foucault's confessor, the listener must refuse the role of confessor who interrogates, interpellates, analyzes, explicates, coerces, chastises, defines, describes, prescribes, punishes, absolves, or withholds absolution. It is important to refuse the confessor's role when dealing with any confession. However, refusing the hierarchical confessional relationship is even more crucial when a student's disclosure is an attempt to bear witness or provide testimony against violence or injustice. Disclosing abuse can be the first step in refusing normalization and resisting social hegemonies, a point that Foucault failed to see because of his patriarchal and elitist perspective.

Rather than providing some sort of secular absolution, the listener needs to begin to shift the narrator's expectations so that the disclosure will live beyond the silencing confines of the traditional confessional dyad. Especially when the disclosure is imbricated with testimony, rhetorical agency almost certainly means speaking out, or acting against, the persons or institutions perpetrating the injustice. The listener can help the narrator reframe the disclosure, not as culminating act, but as segue into engaged and artful inquiry. This adjustment in expectations, however, means modifying a socially conditioned response that views confession as an end in itself.

Framed in pragmatic terms, Foucault's socially constructed "felt need" to confess is understood as "social habit." Yet, both Dewey and James emphasized that individuals have the potential of being far more than a simple conduit for social habits. People can modify their desires, in part, because desires that are stimulated by an impulse for change are somewhat plastic, so their satisfaction can be channeled more than one way (See James, 1987, p. 68; Dewey, 1988, pp. 70, 75). In other words, one may resolve conflicting habits with a machine-like repetition of behavior, which, in the case of confession, would be a return to the prescribed roles and rituals of confessional discourse. On the other hand, one may instigate a conscious search for opportunities to fulfill those desires in new and potentially more satisfying ways.

Once the disclosure has occurred, it may be rendered either aesthetic or anesthetic depending upon what follows. The disclosure will be anesthetic if narrator and listener depend upon an inert set of rules or procedures or to fall back into the comfortable confessor-confessant roles. However, if the listener can shift from Foucault's confessor into a guide and resource, she may be able to assist the narrator in becoming principle investigator, opening the way for the disclosure to become aesthetic. The disclosure must be reframed, not as a culmination, but as the first act of a new drama.

Aesthetic disclosure, then, requires that the listener-guide and narrator engage in two types of inquiry that alternate with, and overlay, each other. These two forms are made up of what I call purposeful perception and articulation of alternatives. In purposeful perception the narrator and listener/guide seek to perceive the narrative through a wide angle lens. The goal is to grasp the narrative in all its complexity and muddiness: its inextricable links with many other stories, and within the narrator’s developmental and cultural history. This warm, intimate, and sympathetic taking in of the situation reveals that there are many ways of “reading” the narrative in its temporal, evolving, embodied, practical, and contextual character. James said,

The mind, in short, works on the data it receives very much as a sculptor works on his block of stone. . . . Other sculptors, other statues from the same stone! Other minds, other worlds from the same monotonous and inexpressive chaos! (James, 1987, p. 187)

I might add: Different narrators, different dramas from the same facts!

As the individual’s narrative is fleshed out, the narrator and listener begin to develop alternatives for action. Together, they consider resources that may be needed and others who may need to be apprised of the situation. Just as an artist is both limited and stimulated by her choice of watercolors or acrylics, canvas or paper, so is the narrator both limited and stimulated by understanding the broad scope of the situation, the available material resources, and the imagination of the inquirers. As the inquirers articulate alternatives, they imagine the many ways that this story, this drama, might play out. Engaging in artful play, they consider the other actors’ inclinations, envision many potential twists and turns of the plot, and conceptualize the dramatic rhetoric.

It is in this articulation of alternatives that the narrator develops her artistry. She is writing many possible stories, so she may engage in falsehood without lying, spinning yarns of what her future will hold, the actions she will take, the words she will use. She can tell tall tales about who she will become, how she will change her world, indeed, what kind of world it will be. However, in these fabrications, she actually prophesies her future. Her pipe-dreams can be investigated and her castles in the sky can be explored.

Conceived as colloquy, rather than soliloquy, this process is inherently social and moral. Not only will others be affected by the decisions enacted, but together narrator and listener reflect and deliberate upon the potential futures the narrator has dreamed, engaging in what Dewey refers to as “dramatic rehearsal” (Dewey, 1988, pp. 132-138). Rehearsing as fully as possible each alternative, they can forecast some

of the probable consequences of each of the courses of action and determine the extent to which those outcomes will satisfy the desires of the artistic principal investigator. The dramatic rehearsals often provide new insights, so the process can circle back to the phases of purposeful perception and articulation of alternatives as necessary.

The final decisions for conduct will be based on the kind of person the narrator wishes to become, the kind of world she wants to take a part in creating. When she makes a decision about the best plan to employ in this improvisational drama, the process of aesthetic disclosure comes to a close. In pragmatist fashion, the point is not discovery of some new truth, even though truths may well be discovered, but with resolution of discord. Relative equilibrium is restored once a decision is made about how to proceed.

Of course, this drama is improvisational. The actors are not following scripts, so when the drama transpires the participants will not play out their roles in exactly the ways that the narrator imagined. The narrator's actions, as well as the actions of others involved in this drama, will have unforeseen consequences. The rhetoric will be more or less successful. Yet, skillful and artful deliberation can better prepare the narrator for coping with the unforeseen and in imagining possibilities for action and desired results.

Aesthetic disclosure, then, is not only an artistic process, but it acknowledges the social nature of our lived inquiry and moral deliberation. As Alisdair MacIntyre has said:

We are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives. Only in fantasy do we live what story we please.... We enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making. (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 213)

Co-authors may not be able to decide everything, but they do have a voice in the outcome. They are not writing on a blank page, but neither are they as completely without agency as Foucault's confessional theory suggests.

Aesthetic disclosure offers the possibility of self-fashioning and co-authoring, of thinking and acting as social, moral, and artistic story-telling beings. Aesthetic disclosure resists the normalization of confessional discourse and offers rhetorical agency in confronting social hegemonies and injustices that repress action, subjectify, and silence its victims.

Of course, self-fashioning is always partial; agency, always temporary; change, always inconsistent and unstable. The process is undeniably mediated by rhetoric and encumbered by culture, history, and language. Yet, in the spinning of yarns and telling of tall tales we reinvigorate our

moral imaginations, opening ourselves to new visions, to artful relations with others. We do not control, but we do have a hand in bringing to pass the world in which we wish to live.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth discussion of Foucault’s perspective on pedophilia in this passage and others in see Linda Martin Alcoff (1996), *Dangerous Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Pedophilia*, in *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault*, Susan J. Hekman (Ed.), pp. 99-135. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

<sup>2</sup> For a somewhat different perspective on this passage see Susan David Bernstein (1997), *Confessional Subjects: Revelations of Gender and Power in Victorian Literature and Culture*, Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997, pp. 22-24.

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