

Therapy Training: An Issue of Inclusion (originally published in Transformations: The Journal of Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility, Summer 2015)

I never intended to be a counsellor or psychotherapist – I fell into the profession because I wanted some skills to back up my work as an Astrologer and Shamanic Practitioner, where I was seeing an increasing number of clients who had suffered major trauma, particularly sexual abuse, and I felt I lacked the necessary level of understanding to be working with these clients. I grew up on a council estate in the North of England and left school at 17 having failed the majority of my 'O' levels, but this was a time when grants to return to education were plentiful and I made good use of it obtaining a full grant to return to education and eventually University. By the time I entered counselling training I was in my mid 40's separated from husband and after 14 years as a stay at home mum, I was looking for ways to generate an income. I was in receipt of benefits and working sixteen hours a week doing whatever jobs I could get, including cleaning, washing up in cafes, and shop work along with raising my three teenage children and studying part time. Fortunately, this was a time when funding was still available to adults who wanted to return to education and not stay trapped in the benefit system. I say all of this to make clear how I am influenced and where my perspective is based.

It also feels helpful to clarify that this article is based upon my own observations and experience. This comes from my own training of 3 years in a college of Further Education resulting in a Diploma, another 2 years training in a University, resulting in a Post Graduate Diploma, followed by a further years training in the same University resulting in a MSc. This has been followed by six years training counsellors on anything from basic introductory courses through to Foundation Degree programmes, in FE, HE and private organisational settings. I have currently stepped aside from working in the classroom for reasons I will touch on later in this article, but I am still involved in training through my work with one of the principal exam boards.

This is about difference and diversity. It is also about counselling training, and all the areas that taps into. It is not however about diversity related to race, or religion or ethnicity. It is about one of the things us Brits do not like to talk about too much – money. We hear a lot about money at the moment in this time of so called austerity. And as a recent letter in the Guardian states, many of us are affected by the growing divide between rich and poor in our society, if not directly, then indirectly through our work and our clients. My interest here is how that divide in our society impacts on counselling/psychotherapy training and then on the profession as a whole.

Today is a very different climate to the one in which I trained. Education for adults now involves paying a high price – this is obviously not just true of counselling training, but affects all post eighteen education. However I would argue that counselling training has some special requirements that need to be addressed, and if they are not addressed, it concerns me that this could increasingly become a profession for the affluent and well heeled, rather than a profession that represents the society in which it works. Many would say this is already the case, and to a

certain extent I would agree, but certainly in the recent past, as my own history shows, it was possible to find a way into the profession.

The differences that I perceive as relevant here are that the training has tended to pull on older more mature students, many who are already working or eligible to work, may have families and other commitments alongside the demands of training which asks that students pay for personal therapy, supervision, insurance and membership of professional organisation. Although the training falls into the category of vocational, there is little guarantee of paid employment at the end of it. Setting up private practice also has its expenses, and the increasing demands of our professional organisations, pose further hurdles.

What I have seen over the past few years has been an increasing level of frustration within trainees and recently qualified therapists at just how difficult it is to make anything of this as a profession and a growing resentment at the lack of opportunities. Over the past few months, this subject has come up again and again with supervisees and at times there is almost a level of despair, after so much hard work, so much self sacrifice, and such love of the actual work, along with the knowledge there are so many individuals out there who are trying to access therapy, but who do not have the resources to pay for it. This is particularly noticeable in those who like myself do not have the support of a second income in the background, who are in a position of needing to be earning a regular stable income. Instead they find themselves not just working for free in agency settings, but having to pay for their supervision, their travelling expenses and sometimes specific training within the agency, leaving them out of pocket. This is on top of having to sometimes give up paid hours of work. If they don't do the hours within the agency then they cannot get the accreditation, which in turns makes it even more difficult to find paid employment. For those who wish to set up private practice, there are again a number of problems. If their home does not have the space for a therapy room, or if their landlord will not allow it, or the house is too full of young children, then that means paying for a room along with all the expense of private practice – which is fine if clients are guaranteed but not if clients are not guaranteed and making ends meet is already a struggle.

Alongside this we have seen the introduction of IAPT, and the considerable sums of money which have been invested in the training of IAPT practitioners. Many therapists in GP practices lost their jobs as this scheme was introduced. As time has gone on, waiting lists have grown, and an increasing number of clients come through my door who either could not access the service, or were offered phone counselling or books to read. Or had counselling and found it unsatisfactory. The service with which I was involved as a trainee, consisting of one qualified psychotherapist and three trainees, was closed down. We had virtually no waiting list – anyone in crisis could be referred straight away. The waiting list is now of some months. And then there is the ever increasing use of anti-depressants and anxiety medication, despite the fact counselling is shown to be more effective in the majority of cases. I have never understood the necessity of the IAPT training, when there is a large pool of perfectly competent, qualified, trained therapists out there to draw on – and the governing bodies have been noticeably silent in this area, no doubt feeling it is 'too political', a statement I fail to comprehend.

Most of you reading this will be aware of all of this and for some of you it may resonate strongly with your own experience. Others may be thinking so what? this is just the way it is. However, if it stays like this as a profession we are in danger of ostracising whole sections of our society from the profession, and I question whether that is in all our best interests. Do we really want this to be yet another profession that is dominated by the white middle classes?

What the solutions may be to these issues I don't know – certainly better employment prospects would benefit all of us. But there are also other issues raised here – the number of students who enter counselling training is increasing. Training organisations are under increasing pressure to fill seats, to keep pass rates high, to maintain retention figures. This in turn is in danger of lowering the standards of qualified counsellors. And there is the whole question of what does constitute good training? And good trainers? The ongoing use of students in agency placements poses many ethical questions, not least that many students in my experience end up working with individuals who have varied and complex requirements and in a more ideal environment, would benefit from possibly working with more experienced therapists – and this is not to decry the outstanding work that many trainees do in these situations. The BACP withdrawal of the requirement of personal therapy in training has done no favours to the profession. I have lost count of the number of times I have encouraged students to undertake more than the minimum requirements of personal therapy, only to be met with the fact they cannot afford it either financially or time wise. This argument is undoubtedly made harder by the BACP stand on personal therapy, and those in the profession who seem to question its necessity. I spent the early part of my life walking the Cumbrian fells, but it in no way qualifies me to take anyone walking in the Scottish Highlands let alone the Himalayas. Surely the same applies to our inner world and our psyche – if we skim the surface of this vast world, how on earth can we think ourselves capable of taking anyone into the depths of their being. And for those who argue that no one can make someone else successfully attend personal therapy, I would agree, but I would also argue that anyone who is not willing to plunge into their own being and explore what is there, is in the wrong profession.

These days I have a flourishing private practice and still love my work. As I said earlier, I have pulled out of the training room, for all those reasons above and my own discomfort at not being able to deliver the standard of training that I believe the profession, and the clients who come to it for help, deserve. My frustration with the profession and its inability to realise the huge potential that exists within it increases as time goes on..... we work to empower our clients, to help them realise their potential and yet I see so many capable therapists grovelling around for work, for acknowledgment and our governing bodies do little, it appears, to really address many of these issues. But ultimately my biggest concern is that not only will many clients who need us, not be able to find the necessary level of therapeutic support, but many prospective therapists, who have so much to offer the profession, will not be able to access training.

