

A Weekend Excursion

Psychodrama at the UKCP Professional Conference, September 1998

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I don't always enjoy going to conferences. This was only the second of the UKCP's professional development conferences I had attended. I arrived with a great deal of ambivalence, exhausted from a week's busy schedule and wondering if I should have opted for a weekend relaxing at home instead. It was mainly the theme of the conference that had drawn me up the motorway to Keele. 'Development through Diversity: Psychotherapy in Society' held out a particular challenge. Present at the gathering would be the diversity of the different sections of the UKCP and our varying backgrounds within those sections. And we would be getting together to explore the diversity existing in the wider society within which we work as psychotherapists. Would it be possible for us to share views and experiences of making psychotherapy more accessible and inclusive, for both practitioners and users, to all members of the population? Could there be enough openness and commitment to these issues without our getting overtaken by the complicated internal politics of the organisation or tripped up by the differences within our own ranks?

Would we really be able to listen to each other and find constructive and creative ways forward which enabled us to unify and connect across difference, rather than dissolve into fragmentation and mutual suspicion?

At this point I am reminded of the similarities between conferences and the proverbial elephant who sometimes appears in the literature of the Buddhist tradition. This elephant is so huge and made up of so many parts that your perceptions of the whole depend upon the bits with which you are in contact. If you're holding the tail you might think you're dealing with a snake. If it's a leg you're touching you might think you have a solid tree. If you're standing next to the vast body it could be that this is like the side of an enormous building. At different times I had very different experiences of this conference and doubtless it would be possible to find as many versions of the weekend as there were people attending it. For me, there were occasions of disappointment and disillusionment when it seemed the priorities could just slither away and disappear back into the undergrowth of familiar

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narrow preoccupations. There were also times of optimism and encouragement when it seemed more as though we represented many branches growing from the same tree, a tree that could give life to and sustain new shoots, new growth. Then there were the times when it just seemed that the edifice was too big and too cumbersome even to comprehend, let alone climb. Last, but certainly not least, there were heartening surprises — a new angle, a fresh perspective, a different vantage point from which to survey the scene.

The three opening speakers provided the lenses through which to gain a better view of the terrain we were there to consider. Included were issues of cultural and ethnic diversity, the need to address structural and cultural change within organisations providing therapeutic services and the particular challenges of widening provision within the NHS. A great start. Initial tiredness gave way to a return of energy. Let's go off into our 'home groups' and engage with these crucial issues. It seemed like a good idea to have a group of about ten people (though this was rather a crowded 'home' for my liking) with whom you could meet for an hour at various times throughout the weekend. The intention was, I think, to get to know a common core of people, to be able to check in with each other and share experiences of the weekend.

Again, I guess it depends which 'home' you landed up in. Rather like families, these 'homes' could be very mixed experiences. Repeating a familiar pattern from childhood, I found myself withdrawing from my 'home group' and joining a much smaller one where it felt more possible to deepen contact and open more fully to the

issues of diversity, both personally and professionally. Discovering the people who formed this alternative 'home group' provided one of the welcome surprises of the weekend. It also served to remind me that in the midst of formal processes there are frequently informal connections which are full of possibilities.

Another surprise emerged in the least expected place. In my experience, plenaries are usually the most distancing and alienating forms of meeting. There is pressure to occupy the head, and a hierarchy based on status and articulacy often emerges. Speakers 'up there' get to talk to us 'out here', and a few confident members of us 'out here' get to voice our opinions, not always in sequence with those of the person who has spoken just beforehand. In the plenary scheduled for Saturday morning, however, a breath of fresh air swept through the conference when Olivia Lousada, a psychodramatist, overturned all the rules of such gatherings. Her session was entitled 'The Butcher, the Baker and the Candlestick-maker' and for two hours she worked experientially with the entire assembly of about 150 people.

She started by inviting us all to bring our attention inside and see what the butcher, the baker and the candlestick-maker meant to us as psychotherapists. She placed three chairs on the stage at the front of the lecture theatre and asked if anyone wanted to come forward to work. Requiring a confidence, or courage, of a different kind, gradually one person, then two and eventually about ten people stood up and went to the stage. What unfolded from this point on completely shifted the energy in the room. The people on the stage engaged in a process of contacting

and communicating what came up for them in the different positions represented by the chairs. They also conducted dialogues from one position to another. Others in the 'audience' also occasionally offered responses or experiences which were integrated into what was happening.

Meanwhile, as one who didn't offer any verbal responses, I found myself being profoundly moved by what was going on. I was thoroughly engaged in the process, finding all sorts of emotions, thoughts and sensations arising and passing, paralleling and often resonating with those being expressed on the stage. By the end I had learned far more and been affected more deeply than would have been possible with any amount of articulate talking from the front. Instead of generating exchanges of views and opinions, which can be the source of both individual over-attachment and collective division, this session touched into less conditioned aspects of our being, where we were all interconnected. For me, it was no loss that there was not time immediately to discuss the implications of this kind of work. The significance of what happened was so multi-layered and far-reaching that it felt more appropriate to have some space afterwards to allow it to be digested.

Space was not something in good supply as far as the formal programme was concerned. This was a point at which I chose to take some time out and allow the process of the previous session to continue its movement in me, rather than rush straight into another group. For me personally this certainly helped to balance out the weekend's activities.

In addition to the plenary sessions and the 'home' group and regional group

meetings there was a wide range of workshops on offer. Many of these combined an opportunity for experiential work with presentations by practitioners from a variety of perspectives. For the most part they addressed various aspects of difference and diversity in personal and social identity and experience, and the implications of these for psychotherapeutic practice. Among the workshops adopting this focus the kinds of issues raised included sexuality, age, gender, language, learning disabilities, economic status and cultural and ethnic differences. Other workshops aimed to demonstrate particular models and ways of working which were relevant to the general issues of difference and diversity.

One of the workshops I attended fell more into the first category, as it looked at working with lesbians, gay men and bisexuals. It contained an interesting exploration of homophobic attitudes and a useful role-play exercise in working with various scenarios which occur in therapy. Two key areas of concern began to emerge. One was to do with the interplay of power relationships and homophobic attitudes within psychotherapeutic practice. The other was connected to the unexplored territory of the diverse nature of sexual desire, for both clients and therapists. So pervasive is the heterosexual norm that buried erotic feelings for the same sex can easily go unnoticed if such experience is not immediately signalled by the identity of either the client or the therapist. An understanding of the psychodynamics of sexuality and relationship plays an important role in exploring this territory. Equally important is a willingness to engage with the political contours. It is only in recent

years that there have been any serious attempts to de-pathologise homosexuality, to provide specific services for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals and to rid professional trainings of prejudice and discrimination. It was clear from this workshop that there is a lot more work to be done in terms of training, professional development, supervision and provision of services.

The other workshop I went to focused on the use of the *Life Integration Workbook*, an approach to creative journal writing inspired by the work of Ira Progoff. Based on a combination of Jungian and Buddhist perspectives, the journal is seen as a means of staying in touch with our inner process as it continually unfolds. Instead of following a linear chronology, the journal is divided into a number of different categories across dimensions related to time, interpersonal factors, the symbolic and the transpersonal. Entries in the journal start from the present moment and follow the creative movement in the writer in ways which connect past and present, outer and inner, the personal and the transpersonal. The practice stimulates and supports a process of inner enquiry which is not bound by culture. It is a way of working on one's own, starting from and following one's own process and linking in to a variety of environmental and social issues characterising the settings in which we live.

The concept of the journal seems to offer a lot of flexibility. On the one hand, it can be used in a self-supporting way by all sorts of people without the potential financial constraints or power imbalances of the therapeutic relationship. On the other, it could be used in conjunction with individ-

ual or group therapy or in more informal peer-group settings. It probably allows for varying levels of literacy, too, in that it could include a range of expression, both verbal and visual. It is also grounded in the practice of reflection and awareness. Whether working with the journal on one's own or sharing it with others, the intentions are based on principles of honesty and openness, without judgement or interpretation. Acceptance is the vehicle for the unfolding of meaning and the accessing of inner resources. Hearing about this method of journal writing, and working with it for a short time in the workshop, underlined for me the value of practising in ways that are rooted in the continuum of psychological, spiritual and political experience. It also reminded me of the potential of these approaches, not just to acknowledge but also consciously to embrace and celebrate diversity.

By the time we reached the final plenary I felt very different from when I arrived, and was very glad I had come. I had some sense of apprehension when we all gathered again in the big lecture theatre, wondering whether the form would encourage those alienating and hierarchical tendencies which had been so wonderfully transformed in the plenary the day before. This was heightened by the agenda of this session, which was directing attention more towards the structure and political processes of psychotherapy and how these might mirror political processes in the wider society. These are indeed important issues, but they are also ones which lend themselves to getting caught up in the internal debates and history of the UKCP as an organisation. It was back to a panel of speakers again, too. While

democratically intended, this set-up did lead to an increasingly hierarchical dialogue in which the theme of the weekend tended to get more and more obscured.

Connected to the hierarchy of who gets to speak, there was also an increasing tone of 'how do we in here, who are all the same, get to involve those out there, who are different?' I found myself feeling relieved when a black woman stood up from the floor to remind the conference that 'we in here' included people with disabilities, lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, members of black and other ethnic minority groups and people of all ages, nationalities, geographical locations and socio-economic backgrounds. How easy it is, even when a conference is focusing on these issues, to render invisible those of whom it is talking. How transforming it might be if the experiences of those people, both within the organisation and in the wider society, could be not just listened to but also freed to take a leading role in shaping the future of

psychotherapy.

Perhaps it's the way of conferences that they both reinforce conventions and open up new possibilities. It's hard to see the whole creature and the way it's heading. What was encouraging was to witness a conference attempting — at least in part — to break the mould, not only in its content, but also in its process. This held out the promise of harnessing that richness of diversity that can truly reach beyond traditional boundaries, rather than being waylaid by the sense of separateness that rigidifies them. How far this can be taken forward probably depends upon the extent of our willingness to open our hearts and imaginations, as well as our minds. If psychotherapy in this country is to make a radical departure from its past chequered history, then it is a serious commitment to the kinds of issues raised at this conference, together with an openness to approaches at once both inclusive and expansive, which will make all the difference.

