personal and political integration

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My own involvement in psychotherapy was met with feelings of dismay by members of my family. Our family image, our story of ourselves as a family, was that we were 'political' and that too much introspection was an avoidance and self-indulgent.

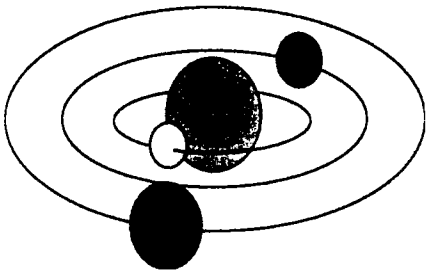
But then I was always seen as the one who was 'helpful' to people so there was a certain amount of acceptance of this state of affairs as it played out my role within the family. Before I became a psychotherapist I had been involved at the fringes of leftist politics and organisations such as Amnesty International. On entering the profession I decided that *politics* was the avoidance and that anyone who really wanted to know themselves should search internally.

It is clear from this description that there was a split between what I understood to be internal and external concerns and that I had moved from favouring one to favouring the other. What had not changed was a tendency to split in this way! Of course I am not alone in this. My attitudes were typical of attitudes that tend to arise in our culture.

So what is the matter with this situation? My feeling now is that any such 'either/or' attitude is unhelpful; that it suggests a rigid and potentially closed way of understanding the world. Certain possibilities will not be countenanced. They are ruled beyond the pale. Maybe we feel this makes them easier to deal with. Once we have sorted out our ideas about what is correct we are not obliged to consider anything else. For instance, if we take the view that any reference to political events in the consulting room is a defensive avoidance of internal anxiety, then we do not have to look any further.

In his paper *The Political Psyche: A Challenge to Therapists and Clients to Politicise What They Do*, Andrew Samuels (1997) makes this point very well. He comes up with six objections that are commonly given to politicising psychotherapy. Very briefly these are: the change of focus from the personal, the undue influence of the therapist, the political views of therapist and client may differ, that it is elitist, that therapy is in its way political without changing it at all, and that political work could be introduced clumsily and inappropriately. All of these objections he considers seriously. Some of them are real concerns but in my, and his view, do not mean that politics should not be countenanced at all costs, but

that these concerns should be taken into account and guarded against. For example, one of the objections is that there is a risk that the client will be overly influenced by the psychotherapist. Samuels points out that concerns about this are particularly pertinent at the moment with the publicity given to the notion of false memory syndrome. A similar point is often made about the influence politicised teachers may have on their pupils. Behind these concerns is an idea that it is possible to come into



another person's orbit and not influence them. Samuels points out that Freud equated transference and suggestion, thus recognising that suggestion is an inevitable part of psychoanalysis.

What we need to guard against in psychotherapy and counselling, whatever our views about politics and psychotherapy, is using our position of power to dogmatically control our patients/clients. Luckily we have a notion in our professions which helps us both to recognise the inevitability of this influence and to guard against its harmful effects. This is the notion of counter-transference. It means that, along with our insistence on supervision for all practitioners, it is to be part of our normal practice that we undefensively explore our own feelings and desires. We attend to our responses to our clients, which could include a wish to control them. The beauty of this discipline is that, rather than engage in agonised self-flagellation, we can be interested in our own responses and see what they mean in terms of the therapy relationship. Taking a punishing or defensive attitude to ourselves can only lead to dogmatic splitting. If any of our behaviours and feelings are not open to scrutiny because they have been outlawed we have to deny them and split them off.

Maybe this means that I am saying that anything goes. I am not saying that. This attitude of interest in all phenomena can only be taken if it is held within an ethical value base of respect and acceptance of ourselves and others. My own view is that we need ethics rather than dogmatic theory to guide us if we are to fully engage with the phenomenal word.

It is interesting that at the present time the question of how politics may relate to counselling and psychotherapy seems to be emerging within the profession. In the last few years a national organisation (PCSR - Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility) has been set up to explore and encourage this area. It is doubtful that if such an organisation had been launched ten years ago there would have been much interest. It may even have been impossible to have set up such an inclusive organisation. PCSR includes any counsellor or psychotherapist who wishes to join, whatever their background or training. This is, of course, a political statement in itself.

Psychotherapy has now been around for one hundred years and it is a matter of some contention whether it has been helpful or not. Views about this can be very polarised. Some see psychotherapy and counselling as completely ineffective (Hillman and Ventura 1992). Others believe it causes moral decay by encouraging libertarian attitudes and the 'sexual revolution' of the sixties. Whatever the truth of the mater, psychotherapy and counselling have become part and parcel of the prevailing culture and cannot, as we sometimes like to think, exist outside of this and just provide a dispassionate commentary on universal truths.

More recently there has been evidence of a softening of these somewhat grandiose and arrogant attitudes. The evidence I see of this is:

1. The formation of BAC and UKCP where there is a readiness to accept differences in theoretical understanding.

2. Theoretical formulations within the different schools of counselling and psychotherapy which are less rigid and show some acceptance of the other's ideas.

3. The discrediting (in some circles) of the idea that the therapist is an expert on the client and the more general acceptance of a mutual search in which both may have insights and both contribute to the emerging relationship between the two.

Of course nothing is ever total and there are plenty of examples of the opposite happening where dogmatic and prejudiced attitudes remain.

I would also like to hesitatingly suggest that there is some evidence of the same less dogmatic attitude within the political world. Attitudes brought to the Northern Ireland peace process sometimes show this. We see Mo Mowlam struggle to hear the deeply held feelings, attitudes and historical hurts of each grouping, and take them all into account. Of course she is as likely as anyone else to become flooded by the extremity of the situation there. When she calls bombers 'animals' I feel she has been overwhelmed by the difficulties so that this stance is hard to maintain. In therapy we spend one hour at a time with our clients and then have reflection time and supervision to help us respond rather than react.

If we oppose the internal and introspective to the external and societal, valorising one over the other, we are perpetuating a false split. There is a constant interplay between the two. Maybe they are just different arenas in which cultural dramas are enacted.

So how do we 'politicise' psychotherapy? What would this look like? For a start I think we could look in two directions at once. We could allow politics to enter the consulting room and bring psychotherapeutic understanding out into the world.

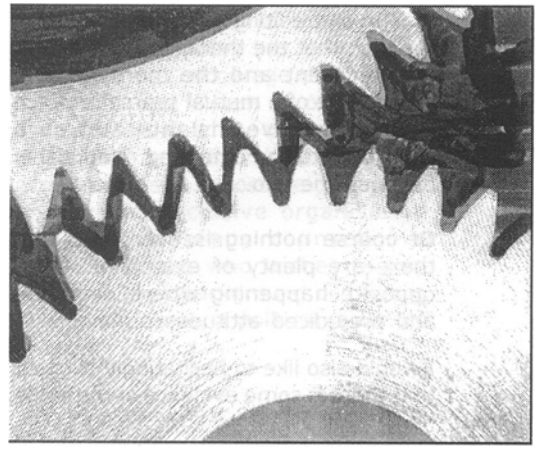
In Andrew Samuels' research, published in his book *The Political Psyche* (1993), he gives results of a world-wide survey into psychotherapists' attitudes to political material brought into a clinical setting. He shows that internationally a significant number of psychotherapists (56%) said that they did 'discuss politics' with their patients/clients. This proportion varied according to the geographical area and theoretical orientation of the practitioner, with British psychoanalysts scoring least!

However, 33% of British psychoanalysts said they did, which is quite a high proportion. It seems, then, that it is not as unusual as all that for psychotherapists to allow political discussion with their clients whatever the theory says.

My own belief is that the extremes of difference between the various theoretical perspectives, at least between psychoanalytic and humanistic psychotherapists, are softening. Most humanistic psychotherapists accept and work with notions of transference and counter-transference and see the need for clear boundaries for the work. Analytic psychotherapists espouse a more client-centred- attitude where there is a common search for truth, and they are more likely to accept that they are not the experts even in the unconscious mind of the client. Through their exploration the client may gain insights before the therapist. For example, the intersubjectivists, who have developed Kohut's ideas, put their emphasis on therapy being about an exploration of the shared space between the therapist and the patient. In this climate it is more likely that there can be an open, undogmatic, attitude to material that arises in the therapy so that the possibility that a desire to act politically can be seen as a true response and one worthy of exploration. This does not mean that the same situation has not internal symbolic meaning or even that it is not a defensive response.

I had a client who was searching for work having had a spell in which he had been ill and on disability benefit. He encountered frustrating responses to his situation from both potential employers and social security employees, both in relation to his having been ill and because they regarded him as too old for the work. He could see how the 'system' was stacked against people in his position. We explored his response to this in various ways. Some were straightforwardly out-in-the-world in terms of how he might take political action etc., so that some of my responses were to acknowledge that there were real difficulties here and that action in the world could be useful and empowering. Some of our explorations were more psychological in exploring his feelings about being rejected and frustrated and putting them in the context of past experiences and experiences in the transference with me. Some were more what one might call spiritual; we explored the meaning for him in having to struggle in this way at this time of his life. None of these approaches to his situation need rule out or be thought of as more important than the other. In fact they may all enhance the other so that any 'political' action he took could be informed by his thorough investigation at many levels.

It is my belief that we can usefully bring the political into our work with patients/ clients. Since PCSR came into being I have felt more supported in thinking about this issue in general and with specific clients. Can we also bring our psychotherapeutic insights into the



political sphere? Occasionally we do see the comments of a psychiatrist or a psychologist on topical issues but rarely that of a counsellor or psychotherapist. Our opinion may be sought if the topic directly affects the profession, for instance, whether counselling is helpful or not following a traumatic event or whether psychotherapists manipulate their clients in cases of 'recovered memory syndrome.' Often public interest in the profession is to challenge or denigrate it. Traditionally we have been hidden away in our consulting rooms and few people who have not experienced counselling or psychotherapy know much about it. It is not surprising therefore that many of us feel some trepidation in becoming more public, though most of us would agree that our insights could be helpful. After all we gain understanding from listening in depth to what ordinary people have to say about their experiences of life.

Many of us would say we take a 'one foot in, one foot out' approach to the work. In other words we participate as ordinary, feeling, experiencing individuals *and* reflect on our responses in a more dispassionate way. This can lead to less reactivity and more genuinely thoughtful responsiveness, and this attitude may help us in the way we respond to the world. It may also be an attitude which could be helpful to those in public life such as politicians. Maybe it could become common practice for people in Mo Mowlam's position to have supervision.

We have some examples of ways in which PCSR groups are already thinking along these lines. The Bristol group of PCSR is initiating dialogues with local MPs and it would be interesting to explore this area with them. The PCSR education group have been advocating supervision for teachers in order to foster this undefensive way of exploring their own responses to the children they teach.

The idea that counselling and psychotherapy is closeted away from society can be a seductive one. It implies a place of safety that the nasty world cannot reach. Maybe this idea perpetuates a split which cannot be sustained if we are to have any real effect in real ways in real people's lives. We live in a plural, multiethnic society which is potentially rich in its variety. In reality it is often riven by prejudice and fear which can lead to fragmentation and even violence. Psychotherapy and counselling theories and practices do have ways to understand and work with these phenomena (Ryde 1996). It follows that the more we are able to enter society the more we will be able to play our part in creating more tolerant and peaceful communities. Maybe, by engaging with this process, our own profession will itself become more pluralistic and multiethnic as it is felt to be more inclusive.

Further Reading

Judy Ryde, *A Step Towards Understanding Culture in Relation to Psychotherapy.* Bath Centre for Psychotherapy and Counselling Working Papers (BCPC, 1 Walcot Terrace, London Rd, Bath BA2 2NU) 1996.

Andrew Samuels, *The Political Psyche*, Routledge 1993.

Andrew Samuels, 'The Political Psyche: A Challenge to Therapists to Politicise What They Do' in *More Analysts at Work* ed. Joseph Rappen. Jason Arunson 1997.

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