

OUT OF THE CLOSET ?

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The days of 'closet counselling' are surely over. No longer can two people sit together, impervious, immune to the environmental and cultural context in which they both live. The solely introverted, 'navel gazing' of past, indulgent therapies, is surely no longer credible in our open, communication-driven society.

As the name of this journal reflects, the self is in relationship to the society in which it (the self) and we (ourselves and the community of selves) reside. This then is an exciting time. Counselling and therapies of all types are going out into the community as never before. In the last 20 years or less, counselling has left the closet of individual practitioners working almost exclusively from home, and gone into the workplace (see the mushrooming rise of Employee Assistance Programmes - EAPs and 'in house' workplace counsellors); gone into schools, colleges, and youth clubs; gone into GP surgeries, hospitals and clinics; and through the admittedly dubious media of TV, newspapers and magazines, gone into the homes and lives of so many people that surely

now, counselling is 'out.' Counselling is in the public arena. Counselling is in the public domain.

That this is so, is evidenced by a public perception (often mis-perception, an ignorantly critical assessment, e.g. the label 'psychobabble') of the endeavour. This presents a challenge to the practitioners of the counselling trade. A challenge to explain and share the insights and processes, understanding and psychological ways of thinking of our 'craft.' Sadly some of us, in our fearful need to exclusively professionalise and protect ourselves, form clubs which we call 'professional bodies' with strict rules of admission and conduct. Very soon, then, an elitism can be constructed and a society, a society of therapists within the general term, 'society,' is founded, closely guarded and maintained. And the words 'therapist' and 'counsellor' are once again owned by the few, separated from the many, and sold through now so-called 'professional practice' by the few to the many. And so counselling goes back into the closet. Not this time into individual homes and a mystery of terminology but instead into a financial closet: a membership closet, where ability to join and ability to pay bring access to its undoubted

benefits. Conversely, inability to join or pay, restrict access.

Counselling may be 'out' in society, but any study of its exclusive clubs evidences its very protective 'in-ness.'

All this (as Richard Mowbray reasons in his book, *The Case Against Psychotherapy Registration*) under the guise of what the public - the wider society of users - needs. Mowbray clearly exposes this justification as a lie, and the disingenuousness that supports professionalising counselling and therapy.

David Pilgrim also critiques the dominance of those who seek exclusivity through professionalisation. 'Professionals exercise dominance over others in three senses. First they hold power over their clients because specialised knowledge renders them ignorant, dependent, vulnerable and insecure. Second, they hold power over their new recruits. The latter are

analysts, is this exciting change in danger of being subverted? Why is the practice of counselling and therapy once again possibly to be restricted to the few?

Perhaps because when any democratising or opening out change occurs, there is so often a clinging to the past by some part of us, perhaps the part (sub-personality?) that seeks to remain with the felt security of the familiar.

Thus I observe, that some part of our collective community of counsellors and therapists 'hangs on' to a preciousness and exclusivity of the singular and secular 'club of counsellors': those of us, for example, that regard ourselves as the grandparents of counsellors ('been practising for "n" years,' as if length of experience somehow validates us or justifies our practising as a therapist); those of us who trumpet our qualifications ('have an MSc in Counselling Psychotherapy,' as if academic prowess and theoretical knowledge somehow validates us or justifies our practising as a therapist); or those of us who announce our membership of a professional body or register ("am an accredited counsellor, registered with ...," as if membership of a self-validating club somehow justifies our competency to practice and validates our right to call ourselves a therapist).

In an 'accountable to others' society, appropriate practical experience, training and self-assessment as burgeoning professionals are necessary and to be encouraged. What it does not give us a right to, I would argue, is an exclusive parking place in society's car park, where, as we park ourselves in the 'therapist's chair', we feel ourselves to be so special, we exclude others, and especially our clients, from the psychological club.

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selected, assessed and referenced by their superiors in a dominance hierarchy within professions. Third, professions seek to exercise a dominant relationship over other professions working with the same group' (*Psychotherapy and Society* by David Pilgrim, 1997).

So why is this happening? Why, when counselling and psychotherapy are emerging from the dark, mysterious couched consulting rooms of bygone

This I have most graphically learned, working as a GP counsellor in one of the UK's (once upon a time) new towns. My clients come from a mix of cultural, and, by income, varying class backgrounds. Their psychological abilities to gain insight and awareness bears little, if any, relationship to occupation, education or class/culture. Their experience of living, learning, and appraising themselves is, in my opinion, correlated to their interest in themselves and the relationships they form with others.

Clients from all walks of life are increasingly emerging from the private, secretive closets in which, often like a shaming hell-hole, they have previously resided. I am in constant awe at the disclosure of childhood abuse, betrayal, depression and humiliation that my clients once 'put up with,' to their now admitted and acknowledged shame. And this particularly from the once culturally defended men, who increasingly, and painfully, reveal themselves to me, the therapist.

And in admiration of their growing courage to speak out, I am conversely appalled at the counter movement by so many of us, the therapists, to stuff both our clients and ourselves back into the psychological closet. The exclusivity of any profession.

I regard myself as a craftsman. I ply the trade of counsellor as an enabler, a facilitator who humbly, yet informedly, sits at feet of my clients, seeking always to understand them, empathise with them, and genuinely believe in their innate capacity for self-healing, self-awareness, and self-actualisation.

I do not want to be regarded as a professional expert. My expertise, such as it is, is there to serve others, and as I have written before (*A Fanfare for the Common Counsellor*, *BAC Journal*, August 1995), to join in the equitable venture of exploration, re-evaluation, understanding and healing; *alongside* and *with* my fellow community dwellers.

For any of us to come out of the closet, with our fears, our anxieties, and our wounds, is to make ourselves vulnerable, to be seen for who we are. It is surely not enough to invite our clients out, to share and voice their stories of suffering: if we as therapists are not similarly prepared to 'come out' and expose ourselves to similar scrutiny.

The growing number of professional bodies and associations are an 'enticing closet' that I believe we should be wary of, for they invariably run counter to the movement towards openness. At least, I would argue, let us insist that the professional closet doors be opened, rather than increasingly closed by obstacles of one form or another.

Further reading

Richard Mowbray. *The Case Against Psychotherapy*. Trans Marginal Press 1996.

David Pilgrim. *Psychotherapy and Society*. Sage 1997

John Sivyver. 'The Common Counsellor.' *BAC Counselling August 1995*.

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