

Working with refugees and asylum seekers at bcpc: politics and psychotherapy in action.



Tree Staunton
talks with Judy
Ryde



Judy Ryde is co-founder of both bcpc and PCSR (Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility). **Tree Staunton** is currently Course Director for Psychotherapy at bcpc and editor of the journal of PCSR. Here Tree talks with Judy about the development of the Asylum Seekers Project at bcpc

T: I have read your PHD research on Being a White Psychotherapist, and admire your dedication to trying to increase diversity within the psychotherapy profession. How was this work inspired?

J: *Being a delegate to UKCP woke me up to how white we all were and I think it was that experience that led me to think more about the political as an important human arena. Following discussions with Andrew Samuels we set up PCSR in 1995 - a project that had been cooking in his mind for some time.*

PCSR has helped me to keep the political context of our psychotherapy work in mind. This was very useful when thinking about the changes I thought were necessary at bcpc and led to my choosing to look at culture and psychotherapy in my PhD. This research was carried out at the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice which has itself a radical political stance. I was challenged there with the idea that I was writing something which should be written by people who suffer discrimination rather than someone who belongs to a privileged group. It was that that led me to look at what it was to be 'white'. I have never regretted this change in focus. It was a hard and salutary journey but has led to my feeling much more grounded in myself when working across difference.

T: As a staff member of bcpc I have really appreciated how your work with diversity has influenced the training curriculum, in terms of looking at issues of culture and race and working with difference. It is thanks to the work you have done in the Equal Opportunities Committee that we now have diversity in the staff group and a fund set up to support non white students. It has also influenced the theoretical approach, and an interest in intersubjectivity - I know

you been developing your thinking around integration of intersubjectivity and political perspectives....

J: I think intersubjectivity theory (which understands the 'self' to be not a 'unit' but to exist only within an intersubjective context) and any systemic or field theory, helps us to allow the personal and the political to have a legitimate place without having to see one as defensive in relation to the other. We don't have to reduce everything to the political or to the personal.

My work with intersubjectivity theory has been to use it to understand culture in terms of what intersubjectivists call 'organising principles'. These principles provide the underlying structure and pattern on which values and assumptions are shaped both for individuals and the cultures in which individuals are embedded. I think this is a more productive starting point for understanding cultural difference than politically correct rules. Although these rules have helped to change the way we relate across cultures (I am using 'culture' in its widest sense here to include gender, class etc) it does not take account of unconscious processes and tends to drive these dynamics underground where they can become more pernicious.

T: I have said elsewhere I feel proud to be associated with a training organisation that has developed something as important politically as the Asylum Seekers project. Where did the idea originate?

J: I had been thinking for some time that bcpc should work with asylum seekers and refugees as I admired the work of the Medical Foundation (for the Care of Victims of Torture) which I knew about through contacts in PCSR. I just found myself making an announcement at the AGM that I was thinking about setting the project up and asking if anyone would like to join a steering group!

T: What were the main obstacles and how did you overcome them?

J: I didn't encounter any obstacles at bcpc although I had to be gently reminded from time to time that I should keep others informed of our plans! The steering group of about eight people met for just over a year when we put policies in place and applied for funding. This was in 2002. Much of what we decided then is still in place. We thought that therapists should be paid but at somewhat less than their usual rate as we realised that it would be very expensive to maintain otherwise, but we were very clear that it would be hard to maintain the work if therapists gave their services for nothing. We also thought that only relatively experienced people should do the work and that all should receive extra training in order to join the project. We require therapists in the project to attend special supervision groups. We knew that the service had to be free to asylum seeker clients as they had almost no money at all but that if we saw a refugee with a good enough income they could be asked to make a contribution to costs.

We asked someone from the Medical Foundation to advise us which was very helpful and they put us in touch with Jeremy Woodcock who had

moved near to our area having recently left his work at the Foundation. He subsequently became our trainer and supervisor. His work has helped us to maintain high standards and provided a good holding presence for the project. He is sadly away for a year but he has set us off to a good start and I now feel that I have enough experience of this work to provide the supervision myself. One of bcpc's external trustees is now taking over from me as chair of the project so that an outside perspective is maintained.

We also made contacts with relevant local agencies such as Refugee Action who were a great support in the early days and helped us get funding by endorsing us.

T: How did you get funding?

J: We made a great many funding applications but finally were successful in receiving a good grant from Lloyds TSB Foundation. They funded us for two years. We felt that we should not rely on one funder but were not successful in finding another major funder until after Lloyds TSB stopped funding us. We were then lucky enough to find another private funder who has so far been happy to support us in an ongoing way. We have had various other small grants but nothing major and funding is always an issue for us.

T: I know you have found there is quite a demand for the service.

J: Yes, there are many more referrals than we can cope with but if we had more money we could more than double the number of weekly sessions. We keep the numbers of therapists who work in the project low – at present there are twelve who see two to three clients a week (we limit the number any one therapist sees to three). Many more bcpc therapists would like to join the project but we can't afford for them to do so at present in spite of efforts to secure more funding.

I don't know if you have ever been involved in fund raising of this sort. It can be very dispiriting when the vast amount of work that goes into grant applications comes to nothing. We have recently done some fund raising events which help but usually raise between £200 and £500 which is a drop in the ocean. Still every little helps.

T: I recently reported in Transformations your sponsored poetry reading which raised more than £400 for the project. These kinds of events remind me of grass roots political campaigning - raising profile as well as funds, and having a good time whilst you're at it.

J :Our latest plan is to bring out a book of recipes from our clients' countries with little 'stories' from the clients' and the therapists' perspective. It is being illustrated by one of the asylum seekers who is an Iranian artist. We are hoping to get this out before Christmas. If anyone is interested in buying one (or selling some for us) then they could contact me. The idea for this book arose because we have a meal together twice a year at our AGM and a study day and try to bring food from one of our clients' countries. It is full of wonderful recipes from countries whose cuisine is not well known such as Ivory Coast and Ethiopia.

T: I'm sure readers will find it hard to imagine how therapy can work when you need an interpreter to talk with your client.

J: We have found the work with interpreters fascinating. A good deal of our extra training is devoted to helping us on that front and it is a steep learning curve for everyone. Rather than see the interpreter as a sort of interpreting machine we try to form a close working alliance with the interpreter and see them as another human being in the room and part of a transference/countertransference triad. We give our interpreters a day's training/orientation to the work which is not enough, but we also spend time talking to them before and after sessions. However bcpc has teamed up with four other organisations in Bristol who use interpreters in counselling/psychotherapy situations and with this group has won some funding to set up a project for the support, supervision and training of interpreters who work in these circumstances. This has been fantastic news for us. It will mean more and better trained interpreters and less leg work for our therapists who have had not only to get in touch with clients who are unable to speak English, but find a suitable interpreter first. Although we have been building up a list it is not always possible to find someone who speaks the right language who can make the right time every week. This work is full of this sort of logistical nightmare. However we find the work compelling and moving and well worth putting in the effort.

T: How has it been received in the community?

J: We have had fantastic feedback from local agencies. The only trouble is that we are overwhelmed with referrals and a huge waiting list has built up. The waiting time to see new clients was deplored by referrers but I think most people understand our funding difficulties. This work has provided bcpc with an opportunity to work with voluntary and statutory agencies more closely and I see that as one of the benefits.

T: Have you made links with the work of Shirin Azari, whose work has been supported by PCSR?

J: I personally have made links with Shirin and have joined her PCSR group. It is great to join with others who have similar experiences. It is a tremendous support. We have to bear so much bad news - our clients are often horribly traumatised by events in their own countries, and come here only to be disbelieved and treated like criminals.

But there are also causes for celebration. I have just seen a client who got her indefinite leave to remain last week. Of course she is rejoicing, and significantly it is today that she was able to let me know details of the events that led to her escape to England. The work is hard and mostly about bearing the unbearable. Regular supervision and our annual study day are part of the support that enables us to continue.

T: It's inspiring and important work, and a good example of psychotherapy and politics in action, using our skills for those suffering torture and mistreatment.

I know readers of *Self and Society* won't need convincing of this connection.