

Occupy: Reflections on my experience as one of the many practitioners who became part of the welfare support group at St Paul's, October 2011

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SYNOPSIS

This piece covers a period from November 2011 to the present in which I have been involved in the Occupy movement, along with other counsellors, therapists, psychiatrists, social workers, and alternative health and body-work practitioners. It is an exploration of:

- my thoughts and feelings and a questioning of whether similar feelings and thoughts are experienced by others;
- why fewer people get involved in Occupy than might be expected;
- thoughts around belonging and sacrifice;
- questioning introjected assumptions about hierarchy and democracy;
- wanting to do things rather than talk;
- how it was for the resident activists – burnout and stress;
- community – who were attracted?; and
- moving forwards – including meetings of the activist reflection group.

In November 2011 I was doing a Diploma in Person-centred Counselling at The City Lit. in London. This course was life changing for me not only personally but politically. I was fortunate enough to have Suzanne Keys as one of my tutors, and to read fabulous writers like Gillian Proctor and Pete Sanders. These and others clarified for me the links between the gross inequality in our society and psychological distress. I joined PCSR (Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility) because I cannot separate politics from human distress, so this is the organization through which I can explore and channel my political ideas and feelings.

Person-centred and other humanistic approaches are potentiality rather than deficiency models. I see my involvement in politics as part of my natural tendency to influence the constant change and growth of our society in a direction which is better for all of us. I would like our society and communities to be places in which we would be focusing our energies not on infinite consumption of finite resources for the perceived benefit of a fraction of 1 per cent of the population but on looking after our relationships with each other, with ourselves and with the ecosystem of which we are a part.

So I was excited by Occupy's questioning of our values: it also seemed to be a quest for positive growth in a direction of our choosing as well as a criticism of what's wrong with our grossly unequal society. I particularly like the clarity of the phrase 'We are the 99 per cent', but despite my excitement and my agreeing with Occupy's values I wondered if I would fit in. And in terms of the psychological dimensions of this experience, I wondered how I would be affected psychologically, and was interested in the possible psychological dynamics that the experience would surface in myself and others.

I first went there alone and wanted to talk about ways of showing my support without camping out at St Paul's. I wanted a badge to wear around London – to show that as well as having to get on with my daily life, I wanted change.

I wandered around and asked questions to which the answer was mainly, 'That sounds interesting – you could bring it up in the general assembly', Who, *me?*... With hindsight it seems that I had introjected the hierarchical assumptions of our faux-democracy. Through gross under-use I did not know how to use my own voice.

Could I not just register my concerns with someone with more power in the organization, let them get on with it while I wear a badge? I had to go home and look after my daughter. I wonder how many others were drawn to Occupy but weren't there because they didn't feel they

would fit and/or because they had families to look after.

I then got involved as part of the 'welfare group', which meant being at the 'welfare tent' for a shift of a few hours each week, and I attended some of their meetings. When I went to the site I felt excited, self-conscious, too clean, unable to speak the language – an outsider. As I left my warm house and young baby to go to the site I left the zone of my comfort in many ways. I questioned everything as I crossed into what seemed to be the necessary discomfort of the site. I asked myself, is it acceptable to buy a coffee? Can I stand behind the barricade with a latte? I was also very excited as I approached. I was excited to be involved, but wondered if I could possibly do enough in a practical sense as well as in my role as a counsellor/listener. Should I have brought blankets to help with activists' comfort? Yes.

With hindsight I realize that I project my feelings of being an outsider on to others: surely there are many, many more of us who agree with Occupy's values/criticism of capitalist values but we are so unused to giving voice to our wishes. How many more of us want change but are so alienated from a truly democratic process that we don't know how to join in when we're invited to? As I spoke to individuals there over the following weeks I realized that I was not alone in feeling like an outsider since I was not living in a tent and not suffering enough!

It seems that this phenomenon is common amongst activists who burn out under the enormous strain. There were plenty there who did burn out – for example, they would be enthusiastically in charge of the welfare tent for a week or two and then disappear. All or nothing, no middle ground. My own exploration of middle ground has often been my first steps towards integration of parts of myself.

I was there to help and be part of the action. I didn't want lots of talk but it was necessary go to many welfare meetings about what we were going to do as therapists and counsellors. We were being asked to manage the issues around how the camp, as a community, attracted long-term mentally distressed people, street sleepers and street drinkers. We didn't want to and couldn't manage or engage with anyone who didn't want to engage with us. Many of the issues were police issues and that felt very uncomfortable indeed for me.

And of course these people did come. They have been rejected from society and had at least found a community which offered hot food! I was uncomfortable with having to accept our limitations and reject those

people in order to focus on the business of supporting 'activists'. It felt to me that in prioritizing in this way, we were behaving like corporations, ignoring the rest of society in order to get on with their business. We did not have the resources in terms of time and space to listen to those who most need to be heard. I found this very hard. The ignorant press chose to see these people as representative of the Occupy protesters per se. Presumably they were attracted by the possibility of belonging, since they have been rejected by our broader society.

There was some hostility towards the welfare set-up. We probably represented an oppressive mental health system run by 'experts', as that is all most people have had access to. My feeling was one of frustration – how can we have a conversation about the democratization of welfare/counselling/therapy at all, let alone under the constant change and pressure of the protest camp?

I wanted to offer support, an empathic ear to activists whose moment-to-moment existence, 24 hours a day, was enormously stressful. They lived in an intense and baffling swirl of real or potential disaster and hope. The myriad issues included updates about the legal process around eviction from the site, drink and drugs on site, violence, wet clothes and bedding as well as profound (for me) experiences of the ideas within and genuine democracy of the Occupy movement.

And just once I was in the right place to offer my ears, head and heart to a very stressed activist. We sat in a dark tent, boundaries flapping in the breeze, and he connected with his feelings in that moment, and I sincerely hope he felt heard. I hope I provided momentary respite from the pressure of sacrifice.

Two years on in December 2013 I attended a joint PCSR and Occupy conference on inner and outer worlds. It was thrilling for me because it was about doing as well as talking. I signed up to *counsellingforsocialchange.org.uk*, which is about helping activists. I sensed my own change, in that I felt at home with people who also want to make the world a better place, and just at the end the most fantastic thing happened. A member of the Occupy group suggested PCSR and Occupy people could meet regularly to support each other and reflect. This was so powerful for me because it had come from Occupy. I don't even know how we had grown towards this point, I'm sure it involved a lot of talking! Perhaps it was the conference itself that brought us together.

We've so far had two activist reflection group meetings – what I felt were great first meetings in January

and February 2014; and my sincere hope is that we can continue to work together, attract more and more of the 99 per cent, and stay wise and psychologically healthy enough to keep at it long enough to effect real change. To quote from Gene Sharp's thorough 2005 study of 'Waging non-violent struggle':

The effects of the use of the diverse methods of nonviolent action vary widely. Such effects depend on... the presence or absence of the use of wise strategies in the conflict, and, finally, the relative ability of the non-violent resisters to withstand repression from the opponents and to persist in their noncooperation and defiance.... (p. 45)

I believe that the repression we face is particularly psychological because it operates behind and within a deeply incongruent corporate culture. This is more sophisticated if less violent than, say a dictatorship. We will do well to stay in touch with our selves, each other and our ecosystem if we want to change each of these systems in a beneficial way. 📍



I am a person-centred counsellor/ psychotherapist working in private practice in Kentish Town in London. I am also about to start working with young people at Off Centre in Hackney.

I have also worked with people who have experienced long-term mental distress for Mind, in a community counselling service in north London, and with men who have offended in north London. I have been a member of Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility (PCSR) for two years.

Reference

Sharp, G. (2005) *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential*, Manchester, NH: Extending Horizon Books