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## Conference Reports

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### Introduction

This article is an outline of my thoughts and impressions following my recent attendance at the UPCA conference held in December 2014 at the University of Roehampton. As a therapist who is currently in training, the conference represented an opportunity for me to participate in the discussion of how psychotherapy is changing in the current political climate. A leading question of the conference was: 'Has something gone seriously wrong with the psychological therapies?' Such a question is prompted by the emergence of initiatives such as Improving Access to the Psychological Therapies (IAPT), which has achieved making therapy more accessible to the masses, but at what cost? What is being taken away from psychotherapy and counselling in the process of perceived progress?

### Impression

The conference felt expansive in scope, making me think far beyond the counselling room, and to really appreciate the political forces and movements that can essentially threaten and control how I am to be with my clients. On a personal level, I must admit that up until this conference I have not spent too much time

thinking about the macro level of psychotherapeutic practice. The experience of being a trainee therapist is one that can feel disparate and fragmented at times. On top of my full-time job as a social worker, I attempt to weave my attendance at university, my supervision and my training analysis in and around my main means of financial gain. In the placement where I am currently in training, I am offered client work, but little or no interaction with colleagues, nor any real idea of what they feel about the wider picture. My attendance at this conference helped me realize how naive I was to think that I could get through training on an individual and autonomous basis, and not be too overly concerned about our changing political times.

The key speakers involved in the conference took it in turns to discuss their own take on the current working landscape for the psychotherapist: a landscape dominated by a neoliberal agenda whereby the UK mental health services are being restructured by New Public Management. Inherent in the speakers' delivery was a fear that this development is threatening the very soul of therapeutic practice, producing manualized and technical practice with ever-increasing regulation. On the micro level, some of the speakers called for more inter-subjectivity and relational work, trying to avoid the culture of management care; on a macro level, speakers spoke of the need to be aware of social policy, and of how government policy can change the nature of our practice. The main thrust is to avoid being passive, but instead be politically engaged, to tackle the dominant ideology undermining psychotherapeutic practice and their organizations. I admit that it was not surprising to see the inclusion of Karl Marx in the proceedings, reminding me of the real threat of professional isolation and the sense of alienation that can accompany the mechanizations of the New Public Management. I am also reminded of Max Weber's 'iron cage' of bureaucracy, and how therapists may come to merely feel like a cog in a machine. Such thoughts introduce a sociological component, and perhaps we should be appreciating the value of a sociological imagination if we are to seriously understand what is happening to psychotherapy in the UK.

### **Criticism**

In terms of criticism, I felt that the conference might have benefited from more opposing viewpoints. There was a sense that the speakers were certainly preaching to the converted, so some variation in perspectives of the speakers (or/and delegates) would have given a more rounded feel to the event. Another minor point is that the movements of the delegates from room to room, to hear from the other speakers, may have reflected the factory-line production that the conference was trying to highlight as a negative. We would have benefited from more discussion after each talk; this felt rushed for both the speakers and delegates.

### **Reflective note**

On the whole, my attendance at the conference helped me to feel part of something bigger, reminding me that I am part of a community, a community that is susceptible to the political change that can directly influence the way I practise. It helped me

appreciate the individual in society, and how one can impact the other. It prompted me to question whether the training and education of therapists should now incorporate a sociological understanding of psychotherapeutic practice. Essentially, the conference questioned my own position in this debate, and my glaring inaction. It has stirred me from a political stupor, and motivated me to not only question what kind of therapist I want to be, but what kind of society I want to live in.