Self & Society, 2015
Vol. 43, No. 3, 256–263, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03060497.2015.1053254

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ROOTS AND HISTORY OF HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY

In at the start: early experiences of the emerging counselling profession in Britain in the 1970s

Jean Clark*

Fellow, British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, Norwich, UK

In 1968 the author first heard about student counselling, and knew this was what she must do. Her life had encompassed change: evacuation; schools in Croydon, Cambridge and Colwyn Bay; secretarial training; work at the National Council of Social Service from 1946–1949, alongside pioneers who saw needs and created voluntary agencies. She studied at Oxford University, to qualify as a social worker. Then married with two children, and after part-time research at Leicester University on racism and the mass media, she applied for the post of 'Welfare Officer, to undertake some Student Counselling' at Leicester Polytechnic, and was appointed in November 1971. Her role in the polytechnic was less than clear: how to create a structure, find resources and create a counselling service.

Keywords: Leicester Polytechnic; Carl Rogers; multicultural; student services; Mary Swainson; Colin Lago

In September 1971 Leicester Polytechnic advertised for 'A Welfare Officer, to undertake some Student Counselling'. I was duly appointed to the post in November 1971, with no resources, to create a counselling service for students. This article tells the story of these early beginnings of the counselling profession in Britain.

An unwitting preparation

Born in 1926, an only child, I grew up in Croydon, until 1939 when war broke out and I was evacuated to Cambridge with an academic family, whose father managed Heffers bookshop. I remember reading *Scott of the Antarctic* there, and the beginnings of a desire to make journeys. After four months I returned to Croydon and yet another school, until my father, with the Ministry of Food, was evacuated to Colwyn Bay in North Wales. It was my fourth school in five terms.

I do not remember being unduly stressed by all these changes. It was wartime, and one was expected to adjust and to conform. I gained 'Highers', but since no-one in my family had ever attended university, when war ended my father enrolled me in a secretarial course in London.

My shorthand speeds were abysmal, and I had not yet applied for a job in London when an organization in Bedford Square contacted the college, asking for someone temporarily for six weeks, and it did not matter about her speeds.

*Email: jeanclark26@btinternet.com

It was a turning point for me, for the organization was the National Council of Social Service (NCSS), and the staff were people who 'made things happen' during the time leading up to the establishment of the welfare state during 1948–1949. I was working alongside the pioneers who created Citizen's Advice Bureaux, Old People's Welfare, Community Associations, Women's Clubs in the mining areas, the Village Hall movement – all rebuilding society after the depression of the 1930s and the war.

After three years at the NCSS, I gained a place at the University of Oxford Delegacy for Public & Social Administration, which would qualify me to become a social worker. The word 'social' was an anathema to my father, who was a staunch Conservative. In 1951, I married a fellow student who was working at Fircroft Adult College in Bourneville, and while we were living in Bourneville we had two children. It was a time when mothers were not expected to work, and it was not until the mid-1960s, when we'd moved to Leicester where my husband had been appointed to develop a law degree at the polytechnic, that I was invited to 'job-share' a lecturer's role for a year at the National College for the Training of Youth Leaders. It was here where I first heard of Carl Rogers and the person-centred approach….

'Student counselling', not social work

I was in the staff common room at the polytechnic, waiting for my husband to drive us home, and I opened a journal on the coffee table. The heading of an article literally jumped from the page: 'Student Counselling', it said. Straight away, I *knew* that this was what I wanted to be – even though I knew nothing of what it might involve, and whether there was likely to be such a post one day in Leicester.

I began to investigate how I might qualify for such a role. I discovered three student counselling courses in different parts of the country, but I was mother to two teenagers and it was 'the swinging sixties'! I could not undertake a residential course. But there was a post-graduate diploma at Leicester University's School of Education, on the 'Psychology and Sociology of Education' – one year full time and one year's research. It might be relevant. I applied, and was interviewed by the course tutor: 'Yes I could offer you a place, but you would find it difficult, as your fellow students will be head teachers and lecturers in colleges of education, *and you have been just a housewife*', he said! At Oxford, I should add, I had researched and written an essay each week, and discussed it in an individual tutorial.

I accepted a place on the course, undertook research on 'continuous assessment' and enjoyed studying again. As I continued to wait for that elusive student counselling post in Leicester, Professor Halloran of the University Mass Communication Centre offered me the opportunity to undertake a piece of research about racism in the mass media, which was to involve designing a content analysis of race-related news in four national daily newspapers. The two research fellows were analysing schoolchildren's perceptions of race.

A year later, in September 1971, the advertisement I had been waiting for appeared:

'A Welfare and Accommodation Officer – to undertake some student counselling – at Leicester Polytechnic'. I duly applied and was interviewed, together with a retired headmaster and a missionary, both of whom commented that it was a pity I was a woman, as they clearly wanted a man. At the end of the day, I was offered the post and resigned from my work on 'Race as News'.

Welfare or counselling?

My job title was an indication that the polytechnic was an organization in a process of change. A large technical college had merged with colleges of art and design and new degree courses were being developed. New halls of residence were being built and student numbers had significantly increased. My boss was an elderly man who had been the administrator in the technical college. He was clearly unhappy about all the changes, and had no idea what student counselling was – though 'welfare and accommodation' were familiar terms to him.

Leicester University Student Health Service, under Dr James Crighton, had a surgery on the polytechnic campus. The university already had a student counsellor, and clearly he had included 'to undertake some student counselling' in the job description for the polytechnic. I had envisaged the future as a student counsellor so clearly, but realized when it happened that I lacked the knowledge and experience to create a counselling service in a new polytechnic with 5000 students and staff. I had been a mature student twice, and had experience in two small adult colleges, but this was very different.

I identified three major tasks before I could begin to see students:

- to find appropriate accommodation where I could welcome and work with students;
- to find my place in the polytechnic structure;
- to find out how to relinquish 'welfare and accommodation' and begin 'to undertake some student counselling'.

Initially I had no idea how to proceed, especially as I had been allocated an extremely large room, possibly intended as a lecture theatre, in the Art and Design building, which was totally unsuitable for counselling students. It contained a metal cupboard, a desk and a chair. I decided to explore other possibilities.

On the same day as my interview, I knew that a publicity officer had been appointed, and I discovered that he had been allocated a small room in the same building. I went to visit him, introduced myself, and suggested he might like more space. He clearly did, and after inspecting my large office, we agreed to exchange rooms. I don't think we asked permission from anyone. I was now on the mezzanine floor of the Fletcher Building, above the accommodation office, in a room that was far more suitable for counselling, though it had no furniture.

The ex-nurse who had been welfare officer for some years and dealt with accommodation for a few students in the days of the technical college was very resistant to my appointment. She had 'sorted out' students' problems in the past and did not know what counselling was. I was also in the uncomfortable position of having been appointed to a senior position, above her. Another new appointee was a careers officer, who would be based at the Student Union.

Finding support

The University of Keele had a flourishing counselling and careers service, which had been developed by Audrey Newsome. I made contact with her and drove to Stoke-on-Trent for the day, where she and her very friendly and supportive staff, which then included Brian Thorne, gave me all the information they could. It was a short course on how to set up a counselling service, how to publicize myself and how to keep records.

'Midwifing' the birth of student counselling

Then came another of those '*and then it happened that…*' times (Clark, 2010), which made a huge difference to what I was able to achieve when I returned to Leicester the following day. While I was working at the National College for Training Youth Leaders, one of my colleagues was Alan Gibson, who was director of the Youth Service Information Centre based at the college. Because of my research on continuous assessment, I was still in contact with the college. I learned that Alan had recently been appointed as an Her Majesty's Inspector of Education (HMI), and had moved to Stoke-on-Trent. I phoned Jenny, his wife, and asked if I might stay for a night, after my visit to Keele. I knew little about the role of an HMI, for I was still very new in the world of higher education, and over supper I asked Alan what the inspectorate knew about student counselling, which was still at a pioneering stage. He went off to his study to telephone some colleagues, and returned saying, 'We don't seem to know very much; perhaps it is time we began to find out more'!

After supper, having asked about my situation at Leicester Polytechnic, he sat at the table with me and we worked together on a possible structure for 'Student Services', which could be a 'federation' of three separate departments – Careers, Student Counselling and Accommodation. I did point out that I had only been in post for six weeks! How could I possibly make something like this happen? It could clearly be satisfactory to all of us, but I had no power in the situation. 'Well,' he said, 'you can ask for a visit from your local HMI, and tell him what you have in mind; and if he likes the sound of it, he will go and talk with your polytechnic director.'

To my amazement this did happen (though no-one knew my role in the situation!), and over time the necessary restructuring was put in place. A male senior accommodation officer was appointed, who would be overseeing the building of new halls of residence, and this was satisfactory to the current accommodation officer, who would be his deputy. I was now relieved of the 'welfare' part of my role, and was free to 'develop student counselling'.

A quiet welcoming space for counselling students

I now had a room with a table and one chair, but no finance for equipment. I discovered the Polytechnic Equipment and Stores Department in the basement of the old Hawthorne Building. The two men there could not understand why I wanted two comfortable chairs, and were even more puzzled that I wanted curtains! The first-floor room I had acquired had one wall of glass, and both net and fabric curtains were necessary to give me privacy. They eventually gave me what I wanted, and they also found two reasonably comfortable easy chairs and a coffee table. It took a few weeks, but finally I was settled, and my new office was in an excellent location, next to the art students' equipment shop.

Talking to staff and students about counselling

By the spring term, I had already started making contact with the Student Union president and executive, to explain to them what I could offer, and I began to meet some heads of schools to tell them what my role was and how it was different from that of a personal tutor. I was sometimes offered the chance to meet with a first-year student

group to explain what counselling could offer, that it was confidential, and how to make contact. And when I visited the Graphics Department on the floor above my office, I was offered some help and advice to develop a publicity leaflet.

All this groundwork took time, and I didn't find it easy, for I had never before been so much in the public eye. But slowly there was a trickle of clients. This brought its own problems, for I didn't have a receptionist to field callers or answer the phone for some months. It was becoming very clear to me that the polytechnic didn't understand what student counselling involved, and that I must argue for the most basic of resources.

Eventually the technical college administrator retired, and a new chief administrative officer was appointed. He had been an education officer in another part of the country, and was far more understanding about student services. I knew I could work well under him, though initially we did meet a minor problem over the nameplate for my office door. I wanted it to read 'Jean Clark, Student Counsellor', which he found quite shocking. I should be known to the students as 'Mrs Clark'! Reluctantly he let me have my way.

I was doing pioneering work in an institution that did not understand what counselling was, and teenage family life was stressful. Where to find support?

Dr Mary Swainson, Jungian psychotherapist

Mary Swainson had worked for some years as a psychotherapist for education students at Leicester University, and was now on the point of retiring. She was planning to leave Leicester, but offered me a few sessions of support. She fully understood the stress of my situation, for she had been a pioneer herself and, I believe, was the first student counsellor, though this was unacknowledged. She was a Jungian psychotherapist, and at that time I knew nothing about Jung. The university library had two books under 'Psychology: Jung'; one was by Carl Jung and the other, *The Symbolic Quest*, by Edward Whitmont, struck a chord in me. I was later to recognize that my journey as a student counsellor was indeed to become a symbolic quest.

It was from Mary that I learned the art of becoming a therapist as well as the practical issues of student counselling. She never did leave Leicester, and I saw her weekly for six years as I struggled with my pioneering role. I owe her a great debt, as she enabled me to discover my creativity and find the courage to innovate.

During the 1970s, various new therapies were coming from North America, and the polytechnic was willing to pay for various weekend and part-time courses, and Mary somehow accommodated all my new learning from these approaches. I had an image of her 'carding wool' as she combed the strands of what I was doing and discovering, and helped me to see and experience the fabric of my being.

By now I was encountering a range of student problems: emotional distress when 'back home' relationships ended, financial and grant problems, study issues, overseas students' language problems, depression, exam nerves, gender issues…. As my workload increased, I was able to appoint a part-time secretary, and then a second counsellor.

Encountering Carl Rogers

I received an invitation to attend a residential workshop on 'Humanistic Approaches to Intercultural Communication' at El Escorial, Spain, for 12 days over Easter 1978

with Carl Rogers and an international staff. The polytechnic supported my application financially, and I was able to be part of a pioneering venture in Spain, which only two years previously had been under the fascist dictatorship of General Franco. Some 170 participants from 20 countries – European, North and South American – met and worked together, with the concept that cultural stereotypes and conflicts can be worked through in a very positive way, using the humanistic psychological approaches developed by Carl Rogers, who has been so influential in the world of therapy and counselling over the past 40 years.

Carl Rogers was the consultant to the workshop, and his staff of 24 included leading client-centred therapists from the USA and most European countries, including Brian Thorne. It was the largest such workshop that had been held, and was seen as a very important experience, both in the development of international understanding and as an opportunity for therapists, counsellors, psychologists, psychiatrists and academics to meet and share their approaches to their clients and to the educational process.

The workshop participants slowly devised a structure to enable us to work at the task of communication. This had to take into account the size of the workshop, the ways in which the staff could be a resource, and the problems of language. Eventually small groups of mixed nationality, age and sex met each morning for three hours with one or two staff members as facilitators. Here we could meet person to person and develop trust as we explored the differences and similarities between us. In my small group were clinical psychotherapists from Switzerland, Belgium, Sweden, the USA, Spain and Germany, a black American educationalist, two lecturers from Spanish universities and a psychiatrist from Guatemala. It was a unique experience.

El Escorial was valuable in my work at many levels, as we came to know and value each other as persons and to face our similarities and our cultural differences. Because there were participants who were involved in complex cultural and political situations, in Protestant and Catholic Ireland, Basques from Spain, South American countries, and black and white Americans, the political issues were real and, at times, painful, and the community worked with and through some of the issues and emotions involved with these at deep and honest levels.

My first contact with Carl Rogers was over a shared interest in the paper he had just written, called 'Growing old, or older and still growing'. Over time he respected my contributions in the community meetings, and at the end of the workshop I was invited to find a group of participants from the UK to attend a similar cross-cultural workshop in Germany, and to be a facilitator.

Working with Colin Lago

When I returned to the polytechnic after El Escorial, Colin Lago, my new colleague, joined me, and I discovered that he also had a deep respect for the work of Carl Rogers. We were to work together for a number of years in a very person-centred relationship. The mid-1970s was a time of immense challenge. At times I felt a connection with those pioneers I had known at the NCSS, who saw needs in the community and made things happen. Now Colin and I began to offer study skills courses for students, since it was clear that many schools had not prepared pupils for study in higher education. Many of our clients did not know how to cope with the lengthy book lists handed out by tutors, or how to plan and write an essay. Some members of the

academic staff were up in arms at our initiative, until we offered a staff workshop about study skills. Then some of them appreciated what we were doing.

We were not popular when we suggested to the head of the School of Textiles, most of whose students came from overseas, that many of their students were struggling to understand lectures, and needed some English language classes, at least at the beginning of their course. Neither were we welcome when we went to see the head of the School of Graphic Design, where all the staff were part-time graphic designers who travelled from London for a day or two a week, and told him that we had more graphics students coming to the counselling service than from any other part of the polytechnic, because they lacked continuity of contact with their tutors.

Colin's arrival in the counselling service was very timely, for increasingly the black and Asian populations in Leicester were growing, and their sons and daughters were coming to study at the polytechnic. This was to challenge my assumptions about young people, which had been based on white students born in the UK, who expected student life to be a time of freedom and growing autonomy. We now had, as clients, young Asian women who were experiencing a clash of cultures, and our training as therapists had not prepared us to support them appropriately. Colin and I decided to invite a small group of Asian mothers to come and meet with us, and tell us what they expected of their young people who were becoming students.

Colin and I were aware that racism existed in the city and within the polytechnic. Our next initiative was to set up on Saturday mornings a regular monthly discussion group of professional people from different cultures, including a psychiatrist, two social workers, a teacher and a community worker. We shared issues and problems, and eventually agreed to write papers, which were published in the then British Association for Counselling (BAC) journal, *Counselling,* for we began to realize that there were few if any training possibilities for those of us who were working 'across cultures'.

I was now 55 and feeling stressed by the appointment of an assistant director for student services who clearly knew nothing about counselling, but was determined to organize our work. It had been a tough 10 years, developing what was now a well-respected student counselling service. Our involvement in counselling students from many cultures, as well as an increasing involvement in anti-racist training, was taking a toll on my energies. Yet it was important to both Colin and myself, as a number of immigrants from various cultures were settling in Leicester, and their sons and daughters became students at the polytechnic. We were seeing young people with complex problems, as Leicester grew more and more into a multi-racial city. I once became involved in a situation when a father was threatening to kill his daughter if she didn't stop seeing her 'white' boyfriend, and we had to help her to a place of safety for a while. I had not heard about 'honour killings' at that time, but apparently he was known by the Community Relations Council as someone who might well carry out such a threat.

I sought early retirement from the polytechnic on grounds of stress and this was granted from December 1981. I was leaving a community of 8000 people where I had created a counselling service and was well known. I was told afterwards that the collection that was made for my leaving present was the largest ever taken. I was given two pictures of Stephen Cohn's paintings, a wonderful reminder of 10 years of my life.

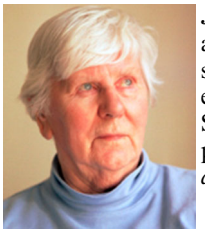
Final reflections on the birth of student counselling in the 1970s

As I have been writing this article, I have become aware of the complexity of creating a new role in a large organization *at a time of major change.* It had demanded from me energy, tenacity, imagination and, at times, courage. Looking back, I am conscious of the lack of structure – even a lack of respect for this activity I was calling 'student counselling'. Certainly I did not call it a 'profession', until that fateful evening with Alan Gibson, newly appointed HMI for Staffordshire, when together we used the phrase 'Student Services', a kind of federation of significant roles – Careers, Student Health, Accommodation and Student Counselling – all concerned with the well-being of students. To be part of 'Student Services' gave me an identity and a context within the polytechnic, even though my part in that restructuring was never recognized – how could it be, when it was developed that evening with my ex-colleague now an HMI? I never could have planned for this to happen.

I was pioneering alone in an organization of 5000 students and staff. To be part of 'Student Services' gave me an identity that was acceptable at that time when student counselling was difficult to understand. The person-centred approach of Carl Rogers and the importance of listening have passed their peak, and we are now in an era when Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), computers and economy hold sway.

In the early 1970s, I was a woman in a very male-dominated polytechnic, on a low pay scale. The contribution of Student Counselling was not acknowledged by the Governors or the Academic Board, although the Student Union valued the work we did and insisted that an additional counsellor be appointed when there was a merger with a college of education and another thousand students and staff. By 1981, when I retired there were three full time counsellors, and a secretary/receptionist, with adequate space for individual client work and discussion groups concerned with issues of race and racism in multicultural Leicester.

Notes on contributor



Jean Clark has lived through times of extraordinary change, with a sense of adventure and curiosity. Married, with two children, she was appointed first student counsellor at Leicester Polytechnic in 1971. When her marriage ended, she moved to Norwich, creating an independent therapy practice. She is now a great-grandmother and writes poetry about ageing, and her poems have appeared in *Self & Society*. Jean edited *Freelance Counselling and Psychotherapy: Competition and Collaboration* (Routledge, 2002).

Reference

Clark, J. (2010). *And then it happened that ... a life fully adventured*. Exmouth: Watershed Publications (available from the author).