Self & Society, 2015
Vol. 43, No. 4, 372–374, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03060497.2016.1144681

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LETTER TO THE EDITORS

Re: 'In at the Start: Early Experiences of the Emerging Counselling Profession in Britain in the 1970s' by Jean Clark (S&S, 43 (3), 2015, pp. 256–263)

Dear Editors,

It was with some considerable pleasure that I read Jean Clark's article in the last edition of *Self & Society*. Jean had kindly sent me a working version of her article some two months previously and, needless to say, both readings have provoked in me significant memories of those times within the world of counselling generally, and student counselling specifically.

I was most fortunate to be appointed by Jean in 1977 to join her in the student counselling service at what was then Leicester Polytechnic. We had met some seven years prior to this when I, as a trainee student in youth work, came across Jean, who was then a part-time tutor on the same course. However, other than nodding an occasional greeting when meeting in the corridor, we had no other contact.

During my five years in full-time youth work in London and then teaching outdoor pursuits in Jamaica for two years, I had come across many young people in distress and who wanted to talk about it. Supported by an American-trained counsellor in Jamaica, I chose to pursue a training in counselling, gaining a place at Keele University.

As you might imagine, there were painfully few posts in counselling in the late 1970s … and my vision was to become a full-time therapist. I only remember two such posts being advertised in the months before course completion, so I felt immensely relieved and grateful to be offered the job in Leicester with Jean.

From the outset, Jean proved an inspiring and wise colleague who clearly possessed not only considerable talent as a therapist but also a wisdom and 'savoir faire' in relation to the broader political environment in which we worked within the Polytechnic structure. This latter point is well illustrated in her article where she gives some details as to the creation, location, positioning and resourcing of the service. As probably anyone who has set up and/or run a counselling service within a larger organization might testify, this broader political/organizational process takes time, stamina, good relational and communication skills, and a recognition that the time spent representing the work of the service to the employing organization is as important as the therapeutic work that is conducted within it. It is blindingly obvious to say that no matter how efficacious the therapeutic work is, unless the service continues to exist, then no such work can occur.

Jean reports how she eventually negotiated an early retirement based upon the stress she had experienced over these early years. Counselling was still relatively unknown, her senior colleagues clearly had little idea of the work and its requirements, under-resourcing was the norm and therefore every move forward constituted an

important developmental step in establishing counselling as a professional practice that had a sound educational basis, and was thus worthy of support in embedding it within the context of (further and higher) education.

Recent supervisory and professional contacts with colleagues who currently work within student counselling continue to evidence the stresses inherent in providing such services. While now being widely accepted within society as an important source of assistance with personal and interpersonal dilemmas and anxieties, the provision of counselling within education can still experience misunderstanding from other (academic, administrative and ancillary) staff, continues to be under-resourced as related to the size of college populations, and the staff frequently suffering the strain of long waiting lists, limited therapy contracts and high incidences of 'psychiatric case-ness'.

Many universities in contemporary times now have student populations exceeding 25,000 students. If one considers the broad national mental health statistics related to anxiety and depression (one in four of the population) and add to that the awareness that students are a population in continuous transition (from late adolescence to early adulthood, from parental/care home to a new place to live and study, from not knowing to gaining knowledge), then it is absolutely no accident that counselling services experience high demand. Add to this the limited availability of roles such as personal or resident tutors that existed in former times, students with troubles will inevitably turn to services that respect their capacities for independence and 'self-righting', that listen to them, not talk at them, that support them in their growth as students and as persons.

In the early 1970s, Jean was in the vanguard of student counselling within the United Kingdom, alongside other luminaries of that time including Brian Thorne, Bernard Ratigan, Paul Terry, Peter Ross and Wynn Bramley. The fledgling Association for Student Counselling had already adopted a three-prong approach to the work of such services:

1. Clinical work with individuals
2. Preventive work – drawing attention to and offering support in resolving institutional issues impacting negatively on student experiences
3. Developmental work – including group work, staff training, staff consultancy.

To these I would add the point made earlier, that services need to pay due attention to their 'front of house' activities, ensuring that the work they engage in is understood and communicated appropriately to the larger 'mother' organization.

Through Jean, we always kept the above four strands of the work in mind. This awareness, I believe, helped us to argue for a third full-time counselling post within two years of my appointment. By then, the Poly had a student population of 7500 and the three of us used to average 5–7 clients per day, week in, week out.

I was most fortunate to learn the above and so much more from Jean. We organized and conducted groups for 'making friends at University', for study skills improvement, for confidence building, for dealing with culture shock, for mutual support and so on. We saw tutors and other staff in professional and personal crisis, offered staff training in listening and personal tutoring skills, and so much more, in addition to the fundamental counselling activity.

Jean taught me the importance of preparing for each new project or group work session, even if we had run it several times before. Being always pushed for time, I just thought we could run it as previously. But Jean used to say, but why are we doing it this time? What are the needs of this course? What do these participants want to achieve? A useful discipline I have never forgotten.

There is no doubt that our work then was stressful and demanding. There is no doubt now that the work of student counsellors continues to be stressful and demanding. Perhaps, in that sense, the internal affective challenges of counselling and running student counselling services have altered little in the intervening 40 years. I am aware of services with long waiting lists which regularly attempt to address these demands through differing strategies, intake procedures, assessment of clinical seriousness and so on.

I do wonder, however, whether colleagues in contemporary times, having been thoroughly immersed in counselling training, are less confident and able in addressing the preventive, developmental and communicative aspects of the work with their senior colleagues elsewhere in the establishment.

It was this spectrum of 'community work' approach that Jean so magnificently conducted and inducted within me. My own later career benefitted hugely from such experiential learning which being in Jean's company fostered. What a mentor and inspiration!

Colin Lago
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