

How do relational counsellors' own personal political ideologies impact on their intersubjective relationships with clients?

Robyn Allen*

Abstract

This research asks the question how the personal political ideologies of counsellors impact on the intersubjective therapeutic relationship they have with their clients. This stems from an increasing awareness of the role of politics within counselling (Milton, 2018). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four qualified relational counsellors to gain qualitative data about their subjective experiences. Interpretative phenomenological analysis resulted in five main themes which showed that therapeutic relationships can be maintained despite similarities or differences in ideologies. Counsellors employ openness and curiosity in these relationships, sometimes managing political ideology in the counselling room by holding in their own ideologies, and sometimes bringing in political ideology by noticing and naming the phenomena they felt between themselves and their clients. Political ideology is important in counselling yet is still considered taboo. The implications of this research suggest that political ideology is not discussed widely enough in counselling training, and that it should be, given the influence that it evidently has on the therapeutic endeavour.

In context

There has been a common belief within the field of psychotherapy that the therapeutic space between a therapist and their client should remain apolitical (Proctor et al. 2006; Peachy, 2006; Milton, 2018). A political standpoint threatens to ignore the individual and unique subjectivities that each client brings into the therapy space. However, a basic principle underpinning this research is that politics is personal (Milton, 2018), therefore it must not be neglected in

the counselling and psychotherapy field.

All kinds of politics have been brought into the therapy room with issues such as Brexit, global conflict, and the election of Donald Trump, all of which can have a very real effect on people's lives and sense of well being (Milton, 2018). In order to move away from the view of distress being individualised, it is argued that counselling and psychotherapy need to take a more relational and cultural approach (James and Foster, 2003).

Cooper (2016) believes that Humanistic Psychology can play a role in this through the actualisation of self and others via therapeutic means. It could be said that this is a social and political ambition for the role of therapeutic relationships.

Studies have looked at values and the roles of various social and cultural factors in counselling and psychotherapy, like social class, race and sexuality. With regards to social class, there are arguments that class impacts on accessibility to counselling and psychotherapy services, disadvantaging people in lower socioeconomic groups (Ballinger and Wright, 2007). In terms of culture, Barrott (2008) describes it as an 'invisible language' (Barrott, 2008, p, 270) within the dyad of counsellor and client, where the cultural identities are similar or overlap or may differ.

Understanding these findings can help counsellors to be aware of some of the dynamics that are at play when these differences, or indeed similarities, are present in the therapy room. However, what has not been gleaned from these studies is how the counsellor experiences these dynamics in moment-to-moment encounters with their clients.

Along with factors already discussed, the political ideology of the counsellor and client can also impact on the therapeutic work (Gartner et al. 1990), and this research aimed to gain some subjective insight into this.

Aim of research

The aim of this research is to capture the lived experiences of counsellors, to gain subjective understandings of the nuances of their practice and how their own political ideologies impact on the here and now moments in relationship with their clients (Stern, 2004).

This research uses counsellors who practise from a relational approach. This is important because the fundamental belief implicit in this approach is that the counsellor uses themselves within the therapy, including noticing how their client may be relating to them.

The microphenomena that occur within the

therapeutic relationship can often provide insight into the process of counselling and psychotherapy. This research seeks to incorporate an exploration of some of the microphenomena that occur within the therapeutic relationship from the viewpoint of the counsellor in relation to the interplay of counsellor and client personal political ideologies.

Studying the impacts of political ideologies on therapeutic relationships could highlight what sorts of considerations are needed within counselling training and the personal development of practitioners. This is particularly important to counsellors and psychotherapists working in the context of highly charged socio-political tensions (Milton, 2018).

Methodology

This research comes from a qualitative, phenomenological approach. A key strength of this approach is that it fits with the notion of exploring and gaining an understanding of the interpreted and lived experience of the participants.

Potential participants were identified from a local community counselling centre and semi-structured interviews were completed which allowed for detailed and personal discussion of lived experiences. A topic guide was used that included an outline of the questions and topics to be covered based on the research question. They were open ended and non-directive, with room for probing questions to gain clarification or elaboration on participant descriptions.

The process of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith et al. 2009) started with transcribing the interviews, reading and re-reading through the data, coding the data; going line by line through the transcripts and picking out words, sentences or short extracts that had significant meaning in relation to the research question. Patterns were identified and themes were clustered together by relevance to the research question and to each other. The connections made between the cluster themes created the five final themes.

Within this approach, participants' experiences are seen as coming from their own perspectives

whilst the researchers' own perspective is also meaningful within the interaction, resulting in a double hermeneutic.

The screening process, intended to select the most diverse sample, was nominal in that all participants were female and left wing. Due to the limited timescale for recruitment, only four people had expressed an interest in participating by the recruitment deadline. The sample was therefore opportunistic. If the research was to be repeated, the sample frame would include age as a banding, and recruitment deadlines would allow more time for potential participants to express their interest, to allow for a more diverse and purposive sample.

Findings

Five main themes emerged from the data. I have illustrated each theme with a key quote picked from the data set.

Theme 1 – Therapeutic relationships can be maintained whether there are similar or differing personal political ideologies between counsellor and client.

'Sometimes things that can feel a little bit awkward, that could potentially be rupture—ous in the relationship with your clients, can actually prove to be a bit of a turn around. That can be quite key to the work'

This first theme looks at how the participants described working with clients who have similar or different personal political ideologies to them. It was found that despite the effect this may have on the internal processes of the counsellor, overall a therapeutic relationship can be maintained.

Most participants indicated that they had positive subjective experiences when working with clients whose ideologies were similar to their own but it is not clear whether or not the counsellor feels this comfort alone or if this is shared with the client, and therefore is therapeutically beneficial.

At the other end of the spectrum, where the participants explored what it was like to work with clients who hold different personal political

ideologies to their own, it was found that although it brought different challenges, it didn't necessarily impact on the therapeutic relationship negatively. However, participants described this as highly emotional. Subjective experiences of feeling sad, fearful, upset, frustrated, annoyed and repulsed were all present within the data, and also expressed in terms of these potentially leading to rupture in the therapeutic relationship. Rupture, however, was also described as repairable, even possibly leading to new ground therapeutically.

So, a therapeutic relationship can be maintained despite difference in ideology, even when counsellors are having difficult and challenging internal experiences and feelings in relation to it. The ways in which the participants managed to remain authentic, connected and present enough to maintain a therapeutic relationship are shown in the next three themes.

Theme 2 – Counsellors felt the need to block their own feelings, when personal politics were brought into the counselling room.

'it's kind of trying to keep it in their frame, and what's going on for them and what does it mean for them' ...I did just control myself'

Entwined in this theme is a big sense of the participants holding their own values in and holding themselves back from putting too much of themselves into the therapeutic relationship. This involved being aware of not externalizing thoughts and feelings, not wanting to give their own opinions, and feeling the need to control themselves.

The ways they did this was highlighted when they spoke about how they would be conscious to firmly remain with the client's frame of reference. In a way, this shows a refocusing from being conscious of their own feelings and thoughts and redirecting their awareness to the client.

Theme 3 – Counsellors brought the felt difference explicitly into the space

between counsellor and client by noticing and naming it.

'just to notice it and then leave it to see what they want to do with it, I wouldn't push it'
'I'm not pretending to be something that I'm not, I can be real'

This theme is in contrast to the previous theme. It is about the counsellor being engaged in the relational dynamics between themselves and the client and seeing their own reactions as therapeutically important and expressing their own ideologies where they feel it relevant. Where the above theme emerged through participants describing working with clients with both similar and different ideologies, this theme is specific to when the client has differing ideology to the counsellor.

Participants described acknowledging their own beliefs and values explicitly with a client, especially if they believed their client was already aware of it on some level, possibly picking up cues on a subconscious level. Other participants expressed the importance of being aware of the phenomenon in the room between the counsellor and client, and how, from the relational approach, this can be utilised therapeutically by noticing and naming the phenomenon as it emerges.

This really brought a sense of counsellors remaining true to themselves and allowing their real self into the therapeutic relationship. It was discussed in terms of being human and having a person-to-person relationship with their clients, allowing their own subjective experiences to influence the therapeutic relationship, including their own political ideologies.

Theme 4 – Counsellors felt they benefited from working with openness and curiosity with their clients, regardless of personal political ideologies and whether they matched or differed.

'I'm making this space for my client so I experience it as quite holding, containing, expansive, curious. So it's a space of curiosity'
'Its important in a way ... to have a more open outlook'

This is essentially about how the counsellors experienced remaining authentically engaged with their clients despite a perception of differences in personal political ideologies, and the effect this had on their own subjective experiences with these clients. Participants felt that it was important to remain curious about the client and open to having their own beliefs challenged and learning something new about the client.

There is a sense that the participants felt this was important when trying to better understand their clients with different ideologies, remaining curious about the meaning of the ideologies of their clients, rather than reacting to them through their own subjective and ideological lens, sometimes even having their own beliefs challenged by clients who presented new and previously unthought experiences and points of view.

Ultimately, this theme demonstrates how the participants manage their own difference with a client, despite dealing with their own internal processes. It shows that remaining open, curious and flexible in the therapeutic relationship is a key tool that they utilised when their own personal political ideologies are in conflict with a client and when it's felt in the room.

Theme 5 – Political ideology is important in counselling yet it is still considered taboo.

'I think the whole of this work is hugely political'
'I feel like I've exposed a bit of myself'

This is an overarching theme that emerged from the data. The participants viewed counselling and psychotherapy as being socially and politically important. Some participants spoke explicitly about this, describing the work as fundamentally political and gave examples of government funding and cuts which impact on the counselling services they work in and the clients they see. All participants spoke to some extent about clients bringing personal political, ideology into counselling, be it through their values and belief systems becoming explicit within the room or by openly talking about

political topics, such as Brexit or the election of Donald Trump. Again, the idea emerging is that the counselling space is politically charged, not just by the counsellors' own ideologies but also the clients'.

Interestingly, participants described feeling like they had exposed themselves or uncovered something previously unthought of during the research interview. Participants' unease at talking about their personal political ideologies in relation to their therapeutic relationships gave the impression that the political is still somewhat taboo within this field.

The fact that participants felt they had talked about and brought up issues which they had not considered before this, suggests that the political facets of counselling have been lacking conscious thought and discussion for the participants up until the interview, which could have potential implications on counselling and psychotherapy training courses.

Interpretation

There is a complexity shown within the results, wherein the participants' experiences sometimes appear contradictory to one another. The general feeling that emerges is one of unknown subtleties that come from working with clients more generally. In relation to the research question, there is the sense that counsellors' own personal political ideologies impact on the intersubjective relationship with clients in many ways as the dynamics vary so much, hence why themes reflected that there are numerous ways in which to use, not use, or otherwise manage these when they come into the room.

However, it is important to note that due to the phenomenological background to IPA, any single analysis cannot be seen as complete, and thus these results are one interpretation of the findings; another researcher may have interpreted the data in a different way.

In the participant transcripts, there was much exploration around the positive subjective experience when the political ideologies of the counsellor felt in line with their client. However, there was nothing to suggest that this enhances

the therapeutic relationship, rather, what was more clear was the potential this had to challenge the therapeutic relationship due to making assumptions and over identification. This is somewhat in contrast to the findings of Kelly and Strupp (1992) who found that counsellors and clients who shared similar values had a higher chance of a positive therapeutic outcome. Whilst the current study did not measure therapeutic outcome so cannot be compared in that sense, it did seem to suggest that while counsellors might experience having similar values as positive, it did not necessarily determine the outcome, or at least the quality of the therapeutic relationship. However, it is worth remembering that values and personal political ideologies may overlap but are not synonymous. It could be said that values are possibly more subtly embedded than political ideologies so could have more of an impact overall, explaining the results that Kelly and Strupp found.

The existence of positive subjective feelings of the participants, like excitement and warmth, when working with clients with similar beliefs, and the notion that the therapeutic work can be challenging, is difficult to synthesise. It could be that identification on the part of the counsellor leads to these positive feelings. This shows that the counsellor must be aware of the possible relational dynamics so that this possible identification does not have a negative therapeutic effect.

The exploration of difference in ideologies by the participants, including the discussion of Brexit being brought into the room, is in line with the work of Milton (2018). He talks about Brexit and other topical political discussions being brought explicitly into the therapy room, and the impact that this can have on the counsellor, as they too are political beings. The current research serves to highlight the subjective lived experience of what Milton has already articulated.

Implications

The current study results back up Peachy's (2006) argument that the political aspects of counselling and psychotherapy are silenced within the training given the interpretation of the way in

which participants felt exposed, suggesting that the political aspects of their work have not been sufficiently discussed during training. This research shows how much political ideologies impact upon the counsellor's experience, so it would follow that there should be more importance placed on understanding these influences in the training. This research shows the relevance and influence of personal political ideology in therapeutic relationships. Therefore, it serves to highlight the importance of being aware of it and understanding how it may change the shape of counsellor's work with clients. There is need for greater discussion on this topic, including on counselling and psychotherapy training courses so that qualified counsellors have gained insights that they arguably need in order to use the therapeutic relationship to its full potential, for the benefit of their clients. **S**



Biography

I completed my MA in Counselling and Psychotherapy in 2018 at the University of Leeds. This research formed my MA dissertation. I am currently a volunteer, counselling adult clients at a charitable

organization. Having trained in a relational integrative approach, I have a particular interest in the meeting points between counsellors and their clients especially around personally held political ideologies.

* robynallen1990@yahoo.co.uk

References

- Ballinger, L. & Wright, J. (2007) Does class count?. Social class and counselling. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 7(3), 157-163.
- Barrott, J. (2008) Culture and diversity in counselling. In W. Dryden (Ed.), *Key issues for counselling in action*, 2nd edn (pp. 270-282). London: Sage.
- Cooper, M. (2016) The fully functioning society: a humanistic-existential vision of an actualizing, socially just future. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 56(6), 581-594.
- Gartner, J., Harmatz, M., Hohmann, A., Larson, D. & Fishman-Gartner, A. (1990) The effect of patient and clinician ideology on clinical judgment: a study of ideological countertransference. *Psychotherapy*, 27(1), 98-106.
- James, S. & Foster, G. (2003) Narratives and culture: 'thickening' the self for cultural psychotherapy. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 23(1), 62-79.
- Kelly, T. A. & Strupp, H. H. (1992) Patients and therapist values in psychotherapy: perceived changes, assimilation, similarity and outcome. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 60(1), 34-40.
- Milton, M. (2018) *The personal is political: Stories of difference and psychotherapy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Peachy, L. (2006) Personal reflections on training as a person-centred counselor. In G. Proctor & others (Eds), *Politicising the person centred approach: An agenda for social change* (pp 60-65). Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books.
- Proctor, G. & others (Eds) (2006) *Politicising the person centred approach: An agenda for social change*. Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books.
- Smith, J., Flower, P. & Larkin, M. (2009) *Interpretative phenomenological analysis*. London: Sage.
- Stern, D. (2004) The present moment as a critical moment. *Negotiation Journal*, 1, 365-372.