

Erin’s Political Diary, September 2020

With Erin Stevens

Of recent times, there has been a stark shift in the way we talk about politics. Everything suddenly seems so much more overt. What would once have been hidden, masked and denied is now spoken out loud in a way that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago. From the Government’s open willingness to break international law, to the Barnard Castle eye-test – flagrant injustices are now in sharp focus. Almost as though in parallel, the political tensions that have rumbled quietly under the surface of the counselling and psychotherapy profession for decades appear to have finally erupted.

The joint British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) and British Psychoanalytic Council (BPC) SCoPEd (Scope of Practice and Education) project continues to bore its way through the fragile equilibrium of counselling and psychotherapy; and I find myself wondering whether we ought to be thanking the three membership bodies involved for daring to drop the pretence, making explicit what has, up till now, existed as an insidious yet largely unchallenged harm in the profession. I am, of course, talking about elitism.

This is the point in this, my first column for *Self & Society*, where I feel I ought to explain a little about what SCoPEd is, and what it is for; but I find myself stuck, and unsure how I can explain it in any meaningful way. Not surprising, considering that the authors of the framework have themselves struggled to articulate the aims of the project, leaving vast numbers of their own members confused and anxious about their future.

In the beginning, SCoPEd was framed as a project designed to map common standards across the profession ‘We are mapping what is out there’, said the head of the SCoPEd technical group and BACP professional standards officer Fiona Ballantine Dykes; ‘We are not creating new standards’ (BACP, 2019).

The first iteration, released in early 2019, was, I think it is fair to say, poorly received. The

opposition to the project ranged from online petitions, a BACP AGM resolution, and the formation of Partners for Counselling and Psychotherapy – a partnership of 14 counselling and psychotherapy organisations, each of which stands in opposition to the SCoPEd project, including the psychotherapy and counselling trade union (PCU). It is estimated that this new partnership represents around 10,000 counsellors and psychotherapists in the UK.

SCoPEd’s attempt to differentiate between the unprotected terms ‘counsellor’ and ‘psychotherapist’ was met with derision, and it has been pointed out that the BACP has itself previously stated that attempts to do so ‘arise from professional rivalries over work and status, and have no place in a regulatory forum focused on public protection’ (BACP, 2009). In the latest iteration, titles have been removed while member consultation takes place; however, some version of them will be reinstated later – a move which has been described by counsellors on social media as condescending and offensive.

The project has been framed as theoretically neutral, but it has been noted that its tiered hierarchical structure places concepts such as working with unconscious processes and working with mental ‘disorders’ firmly up the continuum of competence. Its apparent enshrinement of the medical model has led to opposition from leading campaign group Drop the Disorder; and Professor Andrew Samuels (2019) has described SCoPEd as ‘an analytical coup’.

SCoPEd has been one of a number of catalysts for what I see as a period of political awakening in counselling and psychotherapy. A small number of pioneering counsellors, most prominently young working-class women, have given voice to some of the injustices in the profession and have sparked an ever-growing political movement in the therapy world. Ordinary therapists, no longer willing to accept the structures which disadvantage them, perpetuating a culture of unpaid work and inequality, are speaking out to tremendous effect.

I see a shift in power and real change being achieved. Counsellors Together UK (CTUK) began life as a Facebook group, started by Maria Albertsen after she became moved to action by stories of counsellors living in poverty, struggling to support their families, and visiting foodbanks. What started as a small-scale stand against the provenance and expectation of unpaid work is now a prominent, women-led campaign group of almost 7,000 members, whose successes include the campaign to stop BACP advertising unpaid roles, and conducting and presenting research highlighting the financial hardship faced by counsellors in the UK. CTUK is also the Partners for Counselling and Psychotherapy’s largest organisation by membership.

This energised engagement with political issues in counselling has not been restricted to organisations: social media has created space for individual therapists, and clients too, to speak up for the profession they would like to see. Twitter has been a particular focal point of political discussion and action. #TherapistsConnect, originally conceived by Dr Peter Blundell, has emerged organically from the therapist community, and now provides a space for therapists of all persuasions and stages of their career to become involved in discussions about the future of our profession. It is my belief that these channels of engagement provide therapists with a renewed sense of ownership of their profession; and while passivity remains an issue across the profession as a whole, there is now an organised group of therapists who are unwilling to allow ownership of counselling and psychotherapy (or their associated titles) to be claimed by those whose interests and values may not align with the collective values that many in the profession strive to espouse.

My own objection to SCoPEd is twofold. I became involved in the 2019 ‘Scrap SCoPEd’ campaign, and subsequently submitted a BACP resolution asking for it to be scrapped, primarily because I do not believe it is motivated by the interests of clients or therapists, and the research was undertaken without a formal ethical review, and without any potential conflicts of interest being declared. It seems to me to be a basic consideration that the three organisations involved in looking at training standards in this research also have involvement with the accrediting and approving of particular trainings; and in my view this should have been noted at the time of the research.

The second, and main element of my objection to SCoPEd is that this apparent lack of attention to the potential unintended impacts of the project, which perhaps ought to have formed part of an ethical review, have left us with a situation where the hierarchy resulting from the research quite obviously, in my view, upholds the status quo, in terms of inequality and significant problems this profession has in terms of diversity. There is an inevitable financial implication in climbing the hierarchy, with additional top-up courses and unpaid placements playing a central role in the ‘gateways’ between tiers. Unpaid work, only available to those who can afford it, will for many be the only way to progress.

Additionally, no attention is given in the framework to cultural differences in how therapy is understood. The inaccessibility of this profession to trainees from marginalised groups is a huge concern; the barriers faced by trainees from diverse backgrounds, including financial issues, discrimination and a lack of cultural sensitivity in training establishments, are well-known. If we do not address the reasons why trainees with a myriad of intersectional diversity are unable to access affordable, safe and appropriate training, we ultimately do clients a deep disservice: a diverse client population deserves a diverse therapist work-force.

And fundamentally, many of the assertions the framework makes regarding competencies are very dubious indeed. My favourite is the assertion that only those in Tier C (who are likely to be those with the most privilege) are able to ‘communicate about the harm caused by discriminatory practices and aim to reduce insensitivity to power differentials within therapeutic service provision, training and supervisory contexts’.

As the Black Lives Matter movement gained headlines, race became a more prominently discussed issue in online counselling communities. It is important that we do not confuse this with issues around race becoming more relevant – race, whiteness and oppression are always relevant; however, as a profession we do not always demonstrate a willingness to examine ourselves, our profession, or how we might individually and collectively uphold white supremacy. Indeed, I made a decision to leave BACP earlier this year, after numerous racist comments were left unaddressed for several days on the BACP Facebook group. Of

particular concern to me was how pathology had been weaponised by individual therapists to attack those posting about racism. It was an upsetting experience for me as a white person, and I have no doubt that the pain felt by those BACP members who have endured racism and white fragility their whole lives will have been far, far greater.

More recently, a problematic letter questioning the need to talk about race in the profession, and describing discussion about race as ‘fashionable’, was published in BACP’s journal, *Therapy Today* (BACP, 2020). These incidents illuminate something that I think it would be unwise to ignore – i.e. that institutionally and individually, racism, and a lack of understanding about how white privilege operates, are as endemic in counselling and psychotherapy as in society at large. It should therefore come as no surprise that the largely white, middle-class proponents of SCoPEd have created a document which, in my view, perpetuates the harms of inequality, oppression and white privilege.

These are issues that can and must be addressed. The political noises rippling throughout our profession are deeply encouraging, and I am particularly enthused by the level of student engagement, exemplified by Therapist Connect’s SCoPEd student debate. The impact that the SCoPEd campaign has had so far is significant and wide-reaching (according to early documentation, implementation of SCoPEd was originally planned for Spring 2019, and this extended period of consultation, as well as some of the minor changes to the document, appear to be a result of members’ responses); and I believe that the balance of power is moving further towards where it needs to be – back into the hands of therapists and clients. I am delighted and proud to be a part of this evolution.

References

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About the contributor



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Erin is an active campaigner on issues surrounding equality and discrimination in the therapy professions, and is a member of the Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility (PCSR) steering group. Outside of the therapy, she enjoys poetry, comedy and classic cinema.

SOME HUMANISTIC WISDOM

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

Margaret Mead, 1901–1978