RETRO REVIEW

Lucy King and Christina Moutsou (eds), ***Rethinking Audit Cultures: A Critical Look at Evidence-based Practice in Psychotherapy and Beyond*****, PCCS Books, Ross-on-Wye, 2010, 128 pp, ISBN 978-1906254315, price (paperback) £13.00, index.**

Reviewed by **Geoff Lamb**

Rethinking Audit Cultures was researched and written during a period I remember well. In 2005 I took over as Director of Inter-Psyche, a unique, broadly humanistic counselling training organisation based within a National Health Service (NHS) mental health trust. At that time, the UK seemed to be heading inexorably towards the state regulation of counselling and psychotherapy, and individual practitioners and training organisations like ours were responding to this inevitability in a variety of different ways.

As an NHS manager, I became familiar with the audit culture, but, possibly because we were neither providing clinical services nor based within the academic system, the impact of this culture was limited to managerial issues, and didn't affect either what we taught, or how we taught it and the level at which it was taught. Other training providers got busy with turning their courses into foundation degrees, working on the principle that the Health Professions Council would only accept graduate qualifications for registration. I held my nerve at this point, being somewhat vindicated when the Conservative–Lib Dem coalition took power in 2010 and decided to abandon plans for full state regulation. Up to my retirement in 2017, I managed to run the course, subject only to the broad British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) accreditation requirements, in a way that was congruent with the models we were teaching.

Reviewing *Rethinking Audit Cultures* in 2021 is interesting. It could be argued that audit cultures have proliferated since the book was first published over a decade ago, and this is almost certainly true. However, what is becoming increasingly clear is that the ruling elite are becoming less and less accountable for their own actions, and one consequence of this may be that individuals are likely to be less intimidated by the prospect of audit.

Broadly, and as may be obvious by now, I find myself in agreement with the various writers contributing to *Rethinking Audit Cultures*. Accountability is important in any profession, and research or inquiry into what works or is less effective is essential. It is when this accountability, in the form of audit, has a political agenda that it becomes a problem.

The book is structured into three parts. The first part, 'The Context of Audit Cultures', consists of two essays. The first, by Cris Shore, addresses the political agenda that underlies the rise of the audit culture in the UK and its effect not only on higher education, which he uses as his example, but on the individuals working there and on society as a whole. Talking about the effects of neoliberal audit culture on the university, he writes:

> What we have witnessed here is the transformation of the traditional liberal and Enlightenment idea of the university as a place of higher learning into the modern idea of the university as a corporate enterprise whose primary concern is with market share, servicing the needs of commerce, maximising economic return and investment and gaining competitive advantage in the 'Global Knowledge Economy'.

The following chapter by the late John Heaton, 'Measurement in psychotherapy', is an excellent

exploration of the impossibility of bringing these two words together. In six lucidly argued pages, John plumbs the depth of the impossibility/undesirability of measuring what psychotherapy does, and puts forward, via the work of the early physician Galen, a revolutionary way of choosing an effective psychotherapist.

Part Two, 'Auditing in Psychotherapy and its Discontents', begins with a chapter titled 'The Sarcophagus of Practice'[1] by Miles Clapham, which focuses on physical medicine and psychotherapy, and the effect of audit cultures on both. Using the work of Aristotle, he highlights the way in which the idea of practice, used by the philosopher to describe a science without a definite endpoint, is slowly being eroded from both medicine and psychotherapy. I describe myself as a practising psychotherapist, and when the odd joker asks me, 'Haven't you got it right yet after 35 years?', my answer is quite truthfully, 'No, I'm still learning'.

There are some poignant examples in this chapter, especially one about the unmeasurable components of a healing relationship where the usual 'rules' of psychology/psychotherapy were almost certainly being 'bent' but which enabled the patient to feel heard, accepted and understood; surely what every client needs from their therapist. One of the nice things about this chapter is that it is an antidote to the characterisation of audit culture as synonymous with the 'medical model'. Miles returns us to a version of medicine which prioritises the 'bedside manner' as an essential element in the art of healing; common ground it shares with psychotherapy.

Chapter 5, 'Dark Times', by Rosalind Mayo, focuses on continuing professional development (CPD) and supervision. The assumption behind the audit-culture approach to both of these is that practitioners will not be naturally curious about developments in their profession, keen to increase their skills and repertoire, and also cognisant of their need to discuss their ongoing work with another more experienced practitioner. I have to say I share Rosalind's cynicism around the proliferation of CPD trainings with which, as practitioners, we are bombarded in our email inboxes and on social media. I would add to this my own disquiet at how the practice of psychotherapy is being subdivided into specialist areas, each of which requires specialist, but very brief, training and a plethora of theory and information. This contributes to the perception of the client as the sum of their problems/diagnoses, rather than as a human being struggling to live as best they can in an alienating world, having received very little support or training in their early lives which might have enabled them to do this optimally.

I found Del Loewenthal's chapter, 'Audit, audit culture and *Therapia*', somewhat problematic, but I acknowledge my own subjectivity here. I can summarise this best by saying that I mostly agree with where he's going, but I'm less comfortable with how he gets there. The essential premise, taken from Plato's idea of *Therapia,* is that, in an ideal society, the well-being of the soul would be prioritised, especially in the education and up-bringing of children. The over-emphasis on individualism, which Del observes in most psychotherapeutic models, is a mistake, and should be replaced with a more socially aware method of working with psychological distress. Audit cultures, as he makes clear, do little to alleviate the malaise of a society that prizes technology and measurement over the soul's fulfilment.

All of this makes sense to me, but there is a danger of throwing the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. In stating:

> I think it is true that ego psychologists and many behaviourists, existentialists, psychoanalysts and humanists do attempt to create a situation where the client/patient is led to think that they are the centre of the world and can have reflected back to them the self-image they think they would like to have (and which probably never existed),

Del misses, for me, the whole point of psychotherapy. I'm sure that there may well be

both therapists and clients who conceptualise therapy in this, frankly, indulgent way. However, what Del is referring to here is a *process* in the therapy, a means to an end, rather than its goal. In other words, having (re)experienced being the 'centre of the world' in the therapeutic relationship, the client can hopefully develop a secure-enough 'self-image' to be able to make relationships in the adult world which are not based on the need to have that image reflected back to them. From this position, it's possible to have an authentic relationship, not just with other individuals but also with society as a whole. I'm not saying that this will create the ideal society, which Plato envisioned, but perhaps the ripples of the authentic relationships created in this way will spread outwards?

The third part of the book looks at the positive side of audit – how it can be used creatively in a psychotherapeutic context. Chapter 7, 'Auditing the Unconscious in the NHS' by Kevin Ball, will probably be quite challenging to those unfamiliar with the work of Lacan and Heidegger, but is well worth a second read, as there's some really useful stuff amongst the abstruse philosophy – e.g. 'My underlying point is that it is essential in any audit to be determined by an idea rather than a directive from above'. I do like an intellectual challenge, and I can definitely say that I now understand a bit more about Heidegger than I did before I read this chapter. The essence of the chapter, however, is much simpler. Audit, or research, can be a useful tool in investigating the functioning of a therapeutic service, especially when it is informed by a well thought out theoretical context, and when it is driven by curiosity rather than dogma.

The last chapter, 'Acceptable audit', is a personal account of Paul Gordon's experiences of audit whilst working in Philadelphia Association (PA) Houses, together with his conclusions about how audit could be usefully applied in a psychotherapeutic context. He makes a point of acknowledging that, where public or charitable funds are being used, some kind of accountability for how they are being spent is inevitable. However, he describes how audit has been badly used in PA houses in a way which has encouraged suspicion and fabrication – presenting what the auditors seem to want to see. Having examined and criticised this, he also lays out some principles which, he believes, should underlie an 'acceptable audit'. I particularly appreciate the way he attributes the motivation of counsellors and psychotherapists themselves, 'people searching for status as professionals', which is also a major factor in the prevailing audit culture today.

As I said at the beginning of this review, the threatened statutory regulation of psychotherapy and counselling didn't, in the event, take place. Nevertheless, the audit culture lives on, especially in public or third-sector funded counselling and psychotherapy. It is therefore still important that audit cultures are examined and challenged, especially when they are applied to psychotherapy and counselling. What no-one has highlighted, though, is that the aims and values of many psychotherapeutic models are diametrically opposite to those of the consumer capitalist system under which we live. The aim of audit cultures when applied to psychotherapy and counselling is to attenuate the power and subversiveness of these; transforming them into treatments designed to turn discontents into well-adjusted model citizens.

Note

1 I didn't know that this word derives from the ancient belief that the limestone, from which the sarcophagi were made, literally ate the corpse – thanks, Miles!