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THE CONTEXTS OF COUNSELLING TRAINING

“Counselling and counselling training are about individuals and relationships: what else might affect them?”

This chapter will explore the contexts of counselling training in the 2010s, in particular changing pressures in society; suggest some of the consequences and challenges likely for counsellors; and what the impact of the following elements might mean for personal development in counselling training:

- strains and stresses
- ethics and ambiguities
- threats
- resources and supports
- realities

Strains and Stresses

Counselling and counselling training do not happen in a vacuum. In an article entitled *For thirty years we've stopped believing in a better world*, Neil Lawson wrote:

What place is there for people if what matters most is profit? What hope for compassion in a world of endless competition? (Lawson, 2010)

He outlines a pessimistic view of British society's priorities in the last thirty years, driven by financiers and economists and colluded with by politicians of most political persuasions. From the political left-of-centre, he argues that we have lived in a culture permeated by greed, market forces and the power of the financial sector, so that for the majority of people life has become:

relentlessly anxious, stressful and exhausting, as we desperately try to keep up on the treadmill of a learn-to-earn-to-spend culture in which there is no time for the things and people we really value; no time even for ourselves.

He questions whether we have any hope of finding 'any meaningful sense of control and therefore freedom in our lives': crucial questions for all of us and especially, perhaps, for counsellors. Margaret Thatcher said 'You can't buck the market' and consequently questions of injustice, honour or integrity became secondary or irrelevant. In the same period, we have been engaged in legally debatable wars, have seen the erosion of much individual liberty and the rule of law and face the ever-present threat of international terrorism, all a long way from the hopeful postwar decades of flourishing healthcare and education, expanding personal freedoms, the end of the Cold War and the long years of apparent economic growth. Meanwhile, from the political right-of-centre, many writers bewail the erosion of family and religious values, leading to the fragmenting of traditional society structures. They fear the increase in immigration with its threat, in their view, to British cohesion and values; the loss of respect for position, class and privilege; the changing attitudes to marriage, race, sex, sexual orientation, the position of women; and the painful threat for some of the realities of political devolution – a disintegration of the United Kingdom.

Similar confusions and conflicts of values are reflected in these comments in a trainee counsellor's tutorial:

When I was in my twenties and most of my life seemed in a muddle, I thought that by the age I am now, everything would be sorted! Instead, some days I feel as if I'm clear about less and less and it's still a struggle to make sense of things.

(Helen, forty-four-year-old teacher)

Counsellors and clients live within the same society, must face similar moral ambiguities, and have to cope with the same financial, economic, political or social firestorms, with potential costs in unhappiness, disturbance, identity confusion and conflict. The demand for counsellors to work on their own self-knowledge and awareness is at least as great ever in order to cope with all those pressures – and what they trigger from personal histories – before they can begin to support clients therapeutically. The pressures and strains come from many directions and, although they are by no means new or unique to this century, the degree to which they impact on all of us and our unavoidable exposure to them through the mass media and information overload are both more intense. Despite decades of political rhetoric, the differential between rich and poor is increasing rather than diminishing, ageism and sexism are still rife, and many people live in fear – of

poverty, unemployment, violence or despair. Many forces such as capitalism, materialism, global politics and destructive climate change have combined in recent years to create a prevailing culture of selfishness, particularly in self-indulgent Western societies. Writers such as Gerhardt in Britain and Akst in the USA have written powerfully about the consequences for both personal development and social/political progress. In Gerhardt's *The Selfish Society* (2010), she argues that a mature, unselfish society is based on the same elements human beings need from a secure family: meeting basic needs, validating each other and working through conflict (a familiar curriculum for many a counselling relationship), yet these are frequently missing in many people's life experience and perhaps significantly so for those who seek positions of political power. In *We Have Met The Enemy*, subtitled *Self-control in An Age of Excess*, Akst (2011) demonstrates the extraordinary demands on self-control in a 'landscape of temptation' – full of the dangers of excessive freedom and endless choice in a time of excess in every arena of modern life – in, of course, the Western developed world. Again, when restraining influences such as religion, family and tradition have lost much of their power, and affluence (and banks lending too easily) removed financial limits, Akst argues that human willpower and ethical resolve are tested almost to self- and other-destruction. In an age lacking clear norms, standards or ideals – what Durkheim, the father of modern sociology, called 'anomie', a demoralizing condition of purposelessness – this exacerbates the difficulty of finding and maintaining a coherent, healthy identity and positive relationships with others, core concerns for clients in counselling and similarly essential in the personal development of counsellors.

Ethics and Ambiguities

Many of the issues and confusions of our society are reflected in the debate – or lack of debate – about ethics: these inevitably impinge on counselling. It is not chance that some of the most important publications of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy have been the successive versions of, first, the *Codes of Ethics and Practice* for counsellors, supervisors and trainers, then the *Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy* (2001, 2002, 2007, 2009, 2010). Associated questions of religion, morality or virtue are also important but come with suspicions of vested interest or intrusive prejudice, while ethical debate is crucial and should be at the heart of politics and of counselling training: what it is to define lives of meaning and fulfilment; what kinds of habits and characters shape compassionate societies; whether empathy for others matters more than individuality; what values will allow us to live well, rather than just consume; and, since identity is constructed both internally and in relation to others, how do we manage our internal struggles for self-understanding alongside an awareness and concern for others. These questions are all the more vital in the second decade of the twenty-first century, since we seem to be living in a time of increasing moral and ethical ambiguity and ambivalence. There is, for instance, draconian monitoring of the appropriateness of teachers' or youth workers' behaviour and frequent panics about protecting children from abuse, yet casual

sexualization of children is rife in advertising and the media; the legal system offers injunctions to protect privacy for those who can afford them, yet destructive media invasions of personal lives through telephone tapping and harassment are condoned or encouraged in the guise of 'public interest'; and some members of parliament apparently play fast and loose with expenses, yet 'benefit scroungers' are vilified. The Coalition government which came into power in 2010 is proposing the 'Big Society' with its emphasis on volunteering and community involvement, while at the same time undermining, by savage financial cuts, the many existing supportive elements of the 'good society', as defined originally by Aristotle, essentially social, communal, compassionate, equal and democratic.

What other manifestations with implications for counselling are there in society of ethical ambiguity and uncertainty? The Office of National Statistics published in 2009, as one of its priorities, the intention to measure the emotional state of the nation; the government now in 2011 has introduced plans to create a 'Well-being Index' and Professor Layard and others have launched their 'Action for Happiness' (2011): all well-intentioned plans to acknowledge that economic success is far from the only or most significant factor in a society. Toynbee (2010) describes succinctly the power with which in France Nobel Laureate economists such as Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen, together with books published in Britain such as *The Spirit Level* (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010), *Affluenza* (James, 2007) and *Inequality* (Dorling, 2010), all demonstrate that the most unequal societies are the most unhappy. Even the rich in unequal countries are less happy than the best off in more equal countries – though they do have a higher standard of living. Yet, here in Britain, massive financial cuts are destroying jobs and many of the services and supports that enable people to survive the hardships of their lives, while bankers continue to reap outrageous bonuses and profit dominates the market: society becomes more unequal by the week. Talk of happiness and well-being – as if they are commodities that everyone should have – seems oversimplified, ironic and hard to accept and the implications for clients, counsellors, counselling services and counselling training are profound. Counsellors will need clear understanding of their own and others' value systems, including a critical awareness of the implications of political views, to prepare them to face the anger, despair and cynicism which may result from all these confusions. The political *is* personal.

Threats

We are faced, then, with contradictory presentations of our society; at low moments, the threats can seem overwhelming. Within perhaps the greatest long-term danger – for those who choose to believe in it – that of the irreversible damage being inflicted on the planet by our abuse of its resources, there are many other threats to individual well-being and social health, which will almost inevitably be brought to counsellors. The traditional steadying influences of religion and the churches have weakened and not been replaced by any other consistent moral or socially-safeguarding framework; our rampantly consumerist society appears to be making many people, especially women, more unhappy rather than

less, as Bunting (2009) describes trenchantly in *The Narcissism of Consumerism*. The cult of youth and persistently ageist policies in the arts, media and professional worlds lead to a hugely wasted resource of people with experience and maturity: the old need to make way for the young, but our culture has lost sight of the kinds of positive roles and identity possible for older people. We have, though, yet to manage well the potential problems from increased life-expectancy and the demands of longevity – many babies born in developed countries will live to more than one hundred years of age, with possible physical and mental infirmities and the consequent strain on families and care systems. Meanwhile, the mass media and their often-inflammatory pre-judgments of people, issues and policies stop many people thinking for themselves and risk fostering a mob mentality. There is a real danger that security fears and the pervasive threat of terrorism may be promoting hostility to other cultures, leading in particular to a growing sense of ‘Islamophobia’ and the confusion of faith with extremism. Perhaps most pervasive and invasive of all, our society has come to be dominated by a ‘celebrity’ and ‘reality show’ culture with the ensuing confusions of aspirations, values and identity: many young people when now asked what they want to be respond only with ‘Famous!’

So, is this too bleak a picture? There are perhaps too many choices, too many negative influences, too much inequality, too many threats, too much instability, too much unreality, too much political cynicism, too many confused values – an overload of very real pressures distorting people’s lives and desires, creating much unhappiness, lack of purpose and meaning, confusions of identity and dysfunctional relationships. And any of these issues or their consequences may end up in counselling rooms across the country, since in the affluent Western world, therapy is an available resource for many, though not, of course, for all. Training – and especially work on their own confusions, blind spots and fears – must equip practitioners to shore up individuals’ emotional health, to facilitate the search for purpose, meaning and self-esteem, to support the struggles to save or grow relationships: all these demands place huge pressure on counsellors who face all the same threats in society and the same tasks of maturity in our stressful culture. Fortunately, as the next section will suggest, for all these pervasive threats and dangers there is another perspective offering more support and hope.

Resources and Support

Many clients and some counsellors suffer under the strain of all these pressures, but there are countervailing influences that save us from despair and remind us of sources of hope. Many theorists have implied that the principal difference between sanity and insanity is the ability to adapt to change: human experience in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is a testament to that. In science, neuroscience, medicine, the law, politics, space, we have had to learn so quickly of matters beyond our awareness a hundred, twenty, even ten years ago. In the UK, our new learning has been lived out in profound legal changes in society in the direction of diversity and in the potential for living longer in better health though

with all the uncertain consequences of longevity. We have made, too, conceptual leaps of understanding concerning our place in our physical universe and in space and in movements towards kindness such as Human Rights legislation and the abolition of capital punishment. We have also faced the ethical and moral responsibility of such as the Freedom of Information Act, so that we can no longer plead exclusion from knowledge of actions taken apparently on our behalf by politicians, business leaders and legislators.

Despite the greed, competitiveness and instabilities outlined earlier and despite their underpinning by neo-Darwinian concepts of 'the selfish gene' which, so it is argued, will always out-do altruism, the twentieth century, despite all its horrors, was also the age in which Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela modelled in their lives compassion, forgiveness and goodness, against all the odds of hostility, scorn and brutality – and alongside their own human frailties. It has also been an age of philanthropy for charities and the arts, and the flowering in Europe and the USA of the great charitable foundations, such as the Gulbenkian Foundation. More recently, in heartening exception to the traditional view of economics as 'the dismal science' extolling only competitive behaviours, the 2009 Nobel Prize for Economics was awarded to a woman, Elinor Ostrom. She has demonstrated that cooperative, collaborative systems of resource management in, for example, common land and shared wetlands, could work well, with ingenuity and resilience, showing human behaviour as much richer and more creative than 'market theorists' would allow. In parallel, recent research, for example the *RSA Social Brain Project*, suggests that we have underestimated the social nature of the brain, its primary ability to recognize, interpret and respond all the time to the input of others, enabling our capacities for empathy, cooperation and fairness (Grist, 2009). This research posits that we are social creatures, with an inbuilt tendency to cooperate and seek out approval – possibly more significant ultimately than narrowly conceived self-interest. In microcosm, all local newspapers and television programmes, alongside the crime statistics and local scandal, week after week hail stories of generosity and kindness, of compassion and heroism. And many of us are fortunate enough to experience acts of kindness and love from family, friends or neighbours – even 'random acts of kindness' from strangers – which lift the heart and serve to balance the painful or trivial 'petty lacerations of daily life', as the novelist Joanna Trollope vividly describes the tribulations any of us face. In addition, therapeutic helping, in many guises, has become far more accepted and viewed with less stigma: though by no means universal, counsellors are now common in schools and higher education, in GP surgeries, in workplaces and available to individuals – who can afford it – privately. There is perhaps a kinder, more compassionate perspective in some aspects of our culture – though not yet in all – towards emotional and mental health needs and vulnerabilities.

British society, too, has moved forward in ways which seemed unlikely to happen in our lifetime, particularly through all the legislation towards equality (see Chapter 3) which has changed life for any of us who have experienced being 'outsiders'. Attitudes usually follow legislation, so there is still much to do to eliminate prejudice and hostility, but for gay and lesbian couples who can legally and publicly sanction their partnerships, for people with disabilities who have the

absolute right to be treated equally, for ethnic minority groups who can challenge overt or covert racism, for employees who can tackle discriminatory ageist or sexist practices, for any other minority, we are moving towards a more equal society – or at least one in which discrimination and hate are not publicly acceptable. Class and privilege and the inequalities deriving from those have not changed much, or at least not in the direction of greater fairness, but much else has changed and continues to change dramatically. The imperative for counsellors to surface and confront any of their own conscious or unaware hostilities or discomforts is stronger than ever. If prejudices are no longer sanctioned by society, more energy might be invested in keeping such views or feelings covert – yet another demonstration of the fundamental need for personal development and the striving for awareness and self-knowledge.

The interaction between society and the individual is, as ever, complex; again, much new research into the way our brains work challenges our concepts of ourselves as autonomous, rational, self-choosing identities – and so may challenge many of the accepted concepts of personal work in counselling training and in continuing professional and personal development. (Chapter 2 will explore this further.) Matthew Taylor (2010) argues that the eighteenth-century concept of the individual self has perhaps run its course and that a new paradigm of human nature is emerging. In this view of human beings, assumptions about the primacy of individual choice, decision-making and autonomy are no longer accurate and Buddhist-like concepts hold sway: the idea of a separate self is an (unhelpful) illusion and we need to privilege and work towards ethical, cooperative habits of mind and behaviour such as compassion and courage. There may be significant connections here with the growing interest of many people in spiritual, ecological, and ecopsychological journeys. As the influence of organized religion wanes, such individual journeys may lead, paradoxically, to a stronger sense of ourselves as social beings. Similarly, de Waal (2010), in his *The Age of Empathy*, argues that sociability and kindness are at least as hard-wired and biologically ancient as greed and competitiveness, so that people are more trusting and fair-minded than economic and political policies seem to assume. All these arguments lead us to a hopeful, less selfish model of being ourselves in the world and one with powerful implications for society, for counselling and for the training of therapeutic practitioners.

Realities

Now, in 2011, after decades of prosperity and individual gratification for many, we are apparently on the brink of a period of austerity unknown since the decade immediately after the Second World War. Then, despite considerable hardship, society remained broadly stable and cohesive: the harsh struggles to survive and rebuild both society and individual lives brought positive qualities to the fore, such as shared purpose, equity of sacrifice, hope (especially in the creation of the NHS) and confidence in the integrity of the political class (Kynaston, 2008). Few, if any, of those responses could be relied on at present. Threats of social unrest, addictive

binge-drinking and drug-taking cultures, and the corrosion of individual lives, especially the young, through unemployment, benefit cuts, increasing homelessness and resentment of persistent inequalities, are deeply worrying. People fear the potential dismantling of taken-for-granted structures such as the NHS and the welfare state, while the lurking growth of extremist political groups on the left and the right and the increasing cynical mistrust of politics and politicians all contribute to a powerful sense of dislocation, vulnerability and threat.

Few of these realities are new – there are strong similarities with, for instance, the 1930s – but they do feel pervasive, different from other more hopeful times and with powerful implications for counselling. The pressures on counsellors in the work place are great: in organizations, they face increasing work loads, but with diminishing resources of time and support, as financial cuts bite and prevailing political values seem antipathetic to the culture of therapeutic helping. Colleagues in related fields, such as psychology, psychiatry and other health professions, still do not in general share traditions of work on self and authenticity and can seem threatened or oppositional rather than supportive. They can seem very ‘other’ in their maintenance of the ‘expert’ role and distance – exemplified in the holding of power and authority even in terminology: they have patients, not clients. Counsellors working freelance face equally intense demands, as more of their clients present with acute distress, mental health issues and dislocated lives. How can counselling training possibly prepare and equip counsellors to face these challenges?

This chapter has come full circle in attempting to outline the social contexts of counselling and counselling training in Britain: in order to weather the storms ahead, we will need all the healthy, creative, compassionate qualities outlined earlier to strengthen our capacities as cooperative social beings. The contribution made by all therapeutic practitioners, whatever professional labels they choose, may be crucial in working with individuals and groups to maximize both survival and potential. Hence, there is an inescapable demand for counsellors to undertake intensive personal work to optimize their own strengths and abilities in the service of their clients, society and, of course, themselves. Perhaps the core challenge for counselling training – and trainers – is to enable counsellors to find their own position of strength and equilibrium. They will have to engage with despair, their own as well as others, yet hold on to hope – needing perhaps an anchoring image which will help them as I am encouraged by the keen vision and soaring strength of the red kite, with its survival and revival against all the odds

Summary

This chapter has outlined the pressures and realities of our rapidly-changing twenty-first-century world, its excitements, incredible pace of change, and pervasive threats, economic, social and personal. It has indicated some of the challenges for counselling and counsellors and suggested some of the resources we can call on to support our ability and commitment to undertake personal work in counselling training.

There is one major facet of societal change not yet mentioned, that of the dramatic revolution in recent years in methods of communication, especially non-face-to-face, with complex consequences for relationships, identity and concepts of self. This deserves particular attention and will be explored in Chapter 3, alongside other relationships of significance for counsellors. The next chapter will explore core concepts underpinning personal development, what it is and why it is essential in the training of counsellors.

Questions for Trainers

- 1 How in training might you help trainees – and yourself – hold the balance between hope and despair?
- 2 How much outside context do you allow or invite into your training? Where is the natural focus of your energy?
- 3 What threats do you experience to your professional and personal self?

Questions for Trainees

- 1 What is your motivation for being a counsellor and who are your role models?
- 2 Which of the 10 ‘personal moral qualities’ in the BACP Ethical Framework – empathy, sincerity, integrity, resilience, respect, humility, competence, fairness, wisdom and courage – might you find difficult to live up to at this stage of your personal development?
- 3 How do you see the relationship between the personal and the political?

General Questions

- 1 ‘A landscape of temptation’: do the freedoms and choices available to most of us feel like threats or promises?
- 2 What is your understanding of ‘Happiness’?

Selected Reading

- Akst, D. (2011) *We have Met the Enemy: Self-Control in an Age of Excess*. New York: Penguin Press.
- BACP (2010) *Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy*. Lutterworth: British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy.
- Grist, M. (2009) ‘Changing the subject’, in *The Social Brain Project*. London: Royal Society of Arts.
- Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K. (2010) *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*. London: Penguin Books.