Paper – Scissors – Stone
Pluralism, psychotherapy values and public benefit

Tom Warnecke argues that UKCP needs to nurture a self-reflective professional community, which celebrates and encompasses the plurality of all its manifestations, if it is to succeed in articulating the benefits of psychotherapy to all sections of society

Sigmund Freud's tremendous success in generating public interest for the ideas and theories he publicised can be credited with bringing psychotherapy to life. It is therefore disappointing how our profession, and with it UKCP, has by and large failed to build on Freud's achievement and promote values and benefits of psychotherapy adequately to modern society. And this is not for lack of effort. In UKCP, much energy has been expended to keep the peace and the organisation together and also to rally to *Hannibal ad portas* alarms that demand attention with depressing frequency. Individual membership may well make UKCP a more effective, cohesive and outward-looking organisation, as the architects of its constitutional change hoped. But we have yet to achieve the functional means to present our field effectively to society and enable psychotherapy to add value of expression in all areas of human endeavour.

Tom Warnecke

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A few words

The problem is not to find some clever marketing strategy but the very real challenge of articulating the values of psychotherapy concisely and in a manner that speaks to all sections of society. And these words will need to be a very powerful few – words that will virtually fit on the proverbial postage stamp – since we aim to communicate with people disinclined to read our rich literature to inform themselves.

Are we able to name and agree psychotherapy's benefits to the public? Psychotherapy is not a social theory but primarily concerned with the distress of individuals and their 'problems of living'. However, people's struggle for vitality and meaning will inevitably include their interpersonal relationships. Also, most private troubles affect others either directly or, as the economist Richard Layard argued successfully, via a public purse, and should therefore be considered public issues. As much as we probably all agree with this argument, it isn't quite that simple to communicate. It is also difficult not to become enmeshed with the health industry and 'back to work' or 'happiness' agendas in the process. And while we have plenty of evidence that psychotherapy works for the individual or the family, we cannot presume that it improves society at large. There is no evidence that the societies with the three most developed markets for psychotherapy, namely the USA, Brazil and Germany, are functioning any better as a result of their population's psychotherapy experience than other, less psychotherapy-privileged societies.

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Mirroring our host societies

Nor has psychotherapy set a shining beacon in society on issues of equality or marginalisation of minorities. On the contrary, our profession has mirrored its host societies in many of their worst aspects. Psychotherapy participated in societal discrimination of minorities and has not been averse to providing ammunition in some instances, through pathologising sexual minorities for example. Psychotherapies are rarely available to the underprivileged or to

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minorities in society, and while efforts are made to expand access, such initiatives will often only deliver some economy version rather than the gold standard of contemporary clinical practice. The controversial decision to introduce standardised treatment for psychological therapies through IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies), the UK government's initiative to improve access spearheaded by Layard, is a good example.

And the long history of conflicts and often bitter rivalries in our profession, and between many of our professional organisations, make it evident that the completion of one's therapeutic process is not an assured passport to insightful self-reflective behaviour, political enlightenment and communal harmony. The field of psychotherapy is clearly no paragon of societal virtue and had better not try presenting itself as an answer to society's troubles.

At the other end of the spectrum of critical views, there are claims that psychotherapy is inherently a selfish business since our theory and practice show a disproportionate focus on the individual. But such arguments do not add up either. Deficiencies of continuous 'Self' experience are a central feature of all severe psychopathologies and individuals who engage in damaging behaviours towards others generally share significant impairments of selfhood, self-esteem and confidence. Any profession concerned with human suffering and distress will inevitably affect the families and social networks of their clients or patients, and psychotherapy is no exception.

No easy answers

So where does that leave us? Certainly with no easy answers to articulate psychotherapy's public benefits. And is it realistic to look at this issue in isolation from the contextual environment of our professional field and its institutions? I suggest not.

UKCP was born and developed as a fragile coalition of psychotherapy modality approaches. Creating an umbrella organisation that could contain and support the broad rainbow of psychotherapies necessitated establishing a pluralistic framework, a framework that was neither biased nor took sides with any one of its constituent modalities, nor gave undue privileges to one approach or discriminated against another. This was only achievable in the form of a federation of modality sections, which comprised training organisations. UKCP's sections provided a meeting place for different approaches to gravitate towards others that appeared to share philosophical or theoretical commonalities. As such, each section established a multi-approach platform for the crucial task of developing generic standards of psychotherapy education and training.

Ideological infighting

For some, UKCP was a step too far into pluralism to participate. They perceived real or imagined privileges threatened by a pluralist equality of modality approaches or believed they held primacy of thought and understanding. For others, it has been an essential conflict between the normative demands of a UKCP register based on generic standards of education and training and the call of individual modality approaches for autonomy: a modernist versus postmodernist conflict if you will. Not surprisingly, society at large finds such divisions difficult to comprehend. Worse, psychotherapy schisms may inadvertently lend greater credibility to psychiatry or psychology. One obvious danger is that our much-cherished plurality of modalities can be seen as a manifestation of political and ideological infighting and the former becomes a casualty of the latter in public perception. The sociologist Peter Morrall (2008: 6) is not the first and only 'outsider' conflating the two when he observes:

> *Therapy enterprise has a long history of conflicts and rivalries which remain today, and choosing a type of therapy and a therapist is a lottery. Therefore, the claim is made that therapy is a deeply dysfunctional discipline.*

Nonetheless, establishing UKCP was a phenomenal achievement for the profession. Over two decades, pluralism's tentative seedling has grown strong roots and turned into a robust tree. Inevitably, there were casualties: individuals or groups passionate about some aspects of psychotherapy who ended up bruised or even under the wheels on this collective journey. But in the process, the diverse modality cultures in UKCP not only learned to talk to each other but also to underpin the pluralistic framework with some trust and confidence in relation to each another. Today, UKCP's standards of education and training are recognised and lauded internationally. But what happened to the tensions between normative demands, pluralism and modality autonomy in UKCP?

Unity and collective identity

In 2009, the UKCP's general meeting took an historic step and decided to pursue the single protected title 'psychotherapist', rather than modality-based titles, in response to government plans for a statutory psychotherapy register. There was, it appears, sufficient trust in our unity and in our sense of collective identity that we could, and would, hold and value the pluralism in our field but identify with a united single professional title in public.

Sadly, this historic moment did not quite receive the recognition it deserved because it was overshadowed by the heated debates about the proposed statutory regulation by HPC (Health Professions Council). But the single title decision nevertheless gives hope for a brighter future, where the qualities of our political process might one day live up to the qualities of our clinical work portrayed so well by Stephen Mitchell (2002: 29):

> *… at the heart of psychoanalysis, its most enduring contribution to Western*

> “Our much-cherished plurality of modalities can be seen as a manifestation of political and ideological infighting and the former becomes a casualty of the latter in public perception”

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culture, has been its commitment to the compassionate, collaborative study of the finegrained texture of individual human lives, in all their complexity and intensity.

Culture change

It is hard the see how our professional political processes could effectively address some burning questions about psychotherapy in today's society without a profound culture change in our professional organisations.

- How could psychotherapy contribute insights and values to society, promote social responsibility and influence public perception on social phenomena?
- How can we improve our dialogues with other professions on such issues?
- How could psychotherapy model the tensions between mental health and wellbeing and assert its mental health competencies in society?
- Can we share beliefs about human behaviour and existence with other disciplines, including counselling, psychiatry, psychology and philosophy, acknowledging the overlaps and specificity of those professional fields?
- How do we improve access to quality psychotherapy (and not just an economy version) to all sections of society?

But there is indeed hope. In December 2009, UKCP discarded its federal structure and became a professional body for both individual and organisational members. This presents a new opportunity for our membership to move towards more collaborative, dialogic and improvisational discourse and create a professional community where the different parts of the organisation can regulate each other in the process. Regulation is of course an emotive word in this profession. But I am not referring to any public protection issues here but rather to a collective identity that allows multiple perspectives to coexist, where realities can be plural and relative, not always in harmony but remain in relationship to one another.

Expanding political discourses

Social constructionism has argued that identity is formed out of the discourses available to us (Burr, 1995). Can we expand our political discourses to include the breadth and depth of the individual, their cultural norms and society interrelations? The term 'multiliteracies' was coined to acknowledge that patterns of meaning differ from one context to another and according to the modes of their representation, for example linguistic, visual, audio, spacial or gestural. Such differences may reflect any number of factors, such as culture, gender, life experience, subject matter or social domain. As such, every exchange of meaning is cross-cultural to some degree.

Perhaps we could draw inspiration from our autonomic nervous system's (ANS) psychobiology to develop the plurality of our political discourse? The ANS consists of two branches, the sympathetic, facilitating 'fight–flight' responses and the parasympathetic, which supports digestion, reflection and integration of experience. While both branches are in natural opposition, they function in a complementary rather than antagonistic manner and are designed to regulate one another. The Swedish physiologist Kerstin Uvnäs-Moberg (2003) observed a crucial link between cognitive processing and ANS arousal. Parasympathetic activation facilitates 'both/and' cognition she established, whereas sympathetic arousal is characterised by 'either/or' mental perceptions.

Co-recognition of multiple aspects

The voices of passion in UKCP are as essential as the calming voices that seek to build bridges and integrate opposing views. Arguably, integration is not a process of unification but a co-recognition of multiple aspects to facilitate their differentiation, mutual acknowledgment and negotiated coexistence. It may be a step too far to speak of a postmodernist vision for UKCP but we can certainly reflect, or borrow from, some of postmodernism's core ideas about values, identity and power, and about their construction and deconstruction through active participation. Arnold Mindell coined the term 'deep democracy' to describe the principle behind a community-building process that hears all voices and roles, states of awareness and frameworks of reality, to understand a complex process within a community or organisation.

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We will need to change our organisational culture if we are to arrive at articulating psychotherapy values that speak to all sections of society. Discourse within UKCP is often robust or confrontational and more self-reflective styles of debate could encourage participation by members who may currently hesitate to contribute. We may also need to live down the image of UKCP as a cabal of trainings driven by vested self-interest. And while the plurality of our rainbow modality coalition is undoubtedly our greatest asset, it simultaneously leaves us with a perpetual challenge as we strive for professional, political and organisational vitality and meaning. We will not succeed in articulating the benefits of psychotherapy until we collectively develop the art of a more gentle, organisational self-regulation and until we recognise and learn to use the creativity in the pluralistic tensions that are present in every conflict.

Psychotherapy values and public benefit cannot be isolated from its practitioners and institutions. They require the fertility and nurture of a self-reflective professional community that unites against all forms of rigidity and strives to encompass plurality of all its manifestations and meaning. P

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