

Regulating the risk of being human

In the drive to be accepted as 'competent', will we deprive our clients of the chance to meet with us, not only as professionals but also as authentic, complex and vulnerable human beings – a healing, but inherently risky, business

by Simon Spence

The article 'The Future Of Counselling and Psychotherapy: Responding to the Government Agenda'¹ (*therapy today*, February 2007) summarises the outcome of the BACP-commissioned report by the University of Leicester, which aims to identify a set of 'core competences' in counselling and psychotherapy and the part these should play in future professional training and in the process of establishing statutory regulation. Responding to the invitation in Sarah Browne's editorial, I would like to raise what I think is an important question about the place in our work for human relationship, and especially its uncertainties. I am extremely concerned that it seems to be absent in any explicit way from the core competences suggested in the report.

Relationship is the central and most important aspect of counselling. Though not at all new, this appears to be a viewpoint that is growing in acceptance and is increasingly supported by research, as referred to, for example, in two articles in the same edition, by Ernesto Spinelli² and Charlotte Sills³.

But do we really believe it? And if we believe it, do we have sufficient courage to be open to some of its possible implications?

For instance, it seems to me that a crucially important truth about relationship is that it is not something that can be provided *by* one person *for* another. If I have a relationship with another person I am in it *with* them. It necessarily implies an element of mutuality. It is something that we are both in together or it is not relationship, but pseudo-relationship.

The need for risk taking

Additionally, if I enter into a relationship with another person that is authentic (and I believe it must be so, if it is to be therapeutic) then I inevitably have to be prepared to take a risk. Because if a relationship does involve me and the other person *together* then I am not in sole control and I therefore take the risk of not knowing for certain what will transpire in, and as a result of, the relationship. I think it is self-evident that to be in a relationship with another person has enormous potential for

benefit and growth. But it also means risk: the risk of being vulnerable, getting it wrong, or not being good enough; the risk of being changed by the relationship; the risks implicit in sharing power. It means being open to what may be unknown (and perhaps unwelcome) in ourselves as well as in the other person. It also involves risk that our getting it wrong may be unhelpful or even damaging to the other person (this is perhaps even more important in therapeutic relationships, where there is an inherent imbalance of power).

All relationships are risky, whether personal or professional. When we set out to meet another person and to allow them to meet us, we do so necessarily without guarantees. I think there is an important issue here, and one which I think demands more attention than it is currently getting; can we be both professional and ethical in our practice, and at the same time take the uncertain risk of sharing our humanity with our clients, with all its strengths and vulnerabilities? I have a suspicion that, in the drive towards regulation, we

may be being seduced by the apparently attractive notion that, if we are competent enough, we can have risk-free relationships in counselling and psychotherapy, and that this would be a 'professional' thing to desire. Not only do I think that this is impossible, I also think that the aspiration itself is anti-therapeutic.

At this point let me be clear that I am not at all suggesting that as practitioners we should consciously set out to practise in dangerous or risky ways. Quite the opposite. I hope that my work is as informed and supported as anybody's by the *Ethical Framework* and the values and principles underpinning it. It is undoubtedly of vital importance that through high-quality training, supervision, and continuing personal and professional development we do all we can to safeguard the wellbeing of our clients as far as this is possible.

If we are an 'emerging profession', it is important that we practise, and are seen to practise, in a competent and ethical manner. To do otherwise would be foolish and morally indefensible. Rather, my point is that if we purposely set out to eradicate risk, uncertainty, and the experiencing of our own vulnerability in our work (because we think these experiences are somehow 'unprofessional') we will be trying to eliminate the humanity of our work, and thus the possibility of authentic relationship. We would be cutting ourselves and our clients off from the very thing that matters therapeutically.

What to accept or reject

So, to BACP and to all of us involved, directly or indirectly, reluctantly or enthusiastically, in the move towards

regulation of counselling and psychotherapy (I guess that probably means all of us!) I make the following plea. Let us welcome and support any regulatory proposals that truly put client wellbeing and empowerment at the centre. That can only lead to good things. However, let us reject (and energetically fight against) any proposals that, because of the fear of risk and the discomfort of uncertainty, reduce our freedom as counsellors and psychotherapists to offer our clients the opportunity of authentic relationship with us; both as competent professionals and at the same time as real, complex and vulnerable human beings. The alternative is the offer of a meeting with a competent professional who administers psychological technology. We do not have to look far to see examples of the ambiguity of technology, which can be used for good or ill.

There is, of course, a 'technological' aspect to our work; counselling and psychotherapy are highly skilled activities and we certainly have important skills to offer our clients. But these are of limited value, and I believe have the potential to do significant harm, if we do not also have the ability and willingness (and the concomitant values and attitudes) to join our clients in relationship – with all that it implies. Counselling and psychotherapy are certainly 'psychological therapies'; they draw heavily on the science of psychology and its applications. But they are also, importantly, wider than that and are deeply influenced by (and have important origins in) other disciplines and other perspectives on human experience, such as philosophy, literature, anthropology, and religious

and spiritual traditions.

I believe passionately that it is this breadth from which our work draws that gives it its unique nature and irreplaceable value. We are able to offer our clients a great deal as a result of it. I would like us to be extremely careful about how we go forward from here if we want to think of ourselves as a 'profession'.

If we accept a very narrow definition of our 'competences' – one that does not do justice to the human realities of uncertainty and vulnerability, nor to the art, and spirit, of human relating as well as its science – then we should not be surprised to find ourselves in a much smaller and impoverished therapeutic world, which, whilst it might satisfy those who for their own reasons may want more certainty, security, and a more solid 'professional' status, will ill serve the variety, individuality, and humanity of our clients and the experiences they take the risk of sharing with us.

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References

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