

Documents from the front line

This section, an ongoing feature of the journal, is intended to include material of a non-academic, practical and immediate nature, representing ongoing psycho-political process – including manifestos, course handouts, leaflets, petitions, round robins and ephemera of all kinds. All contributions will be gratefully received.

S.T.O.P STATE REGULATION OF COUNSELLING AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

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[S.T.O.P: Stop, Think, Other Possibilities]

THE STORY SO FAR

The push towards state regulation emanates from an alliance of training and accreditation organisations (BACP and UKCP) concerned with extending control over entry into therapeutic practice. Deploying a mantra ‘for the protection of the public’ has served to deflect and depress discussion of what is at stake. Neither counsellors nor psychotherapists nor the public have been adequately consulted nor are in any agreement that this is what they want. The case against state regulation has already been comprehensively argued in two books in print for the last ten years (Mowbray; 1995; House and Totton, 1997) and in numerous articles (e.g. Postle, 1998; Totton 1999; Totton, forthcoming). To date the lobby for SR has largely avoided engagement with the argument, as if they recognised their project would not

stand up to the test of open debate, instead pressing ahead behind the scenes while claiming to represent an (invisible) consensus.

In 2001 a private members bill for the Statutory Registration of Psychotherapists was introduced in parliament by Lord Alderdice. It fell at the first reading when the government was alerted to bitter division between the aforementioned umbrella organisations, the larger of which was excluded. The government then signalled that no further legislation for title protection would be considered. Before long the SR lobby switched to an extra-parliamentary route and began negotiating with the Department of Health who offered subordination to the Health Professions Council as the only way forward. Once again the SR lobby cultivated the impression with civil servants that sufficient consultation with practitioners had

taken place when in fact no mandate for this destination has ever been given.

In particular the SR lobby has tried to obscure from view the shifting of the goalposts from statutory registration to state regulation, aware that this is a much more contentious destination, that entails a serious surrender of professional independence. It is the growing rumblings of discontent over this sleight of hand that give grounds for believing that a focused campaign at this juncture could shift opinion once and for all against an encroachment of state power into the psychological domain.

PREMISES

The case for state regulation derives from a collection of false premises, some of which follow below.

1. Surveillance argument

That it is the proper business of the state to oversee the provision of counselling and psychotherapy and that such surveillance is politically innocent rather than driven by policy e.g. to extend audit culture; and ideology e.g. terror threatens our way of life, the market will make you happy. State involvement with psychological therapies jeopardises practitioner neutrality and erodes the client's psychic space.

2. Monoculture argument

That a centralised monoculture of psychological practice, administered by a tick-box bureaucracy, gridlocking therapy into standardised criteria, is preferable to the current field which at ground level persists as a diverse, local and intuitively responsive ecology.

3. Trainer power argument

That input regulation (the control of entry into practice by training institutes) will protect the public better than output regu-

lation (the fostering of integrity at the point of contact between therapist and client). In the competition to survive in the training market institutes able to claim their state validation is an exclusive passport into practice, can cover reliance on the capacity to pay ever-higher training costs as the key criterion for acceptance into training. Contrast this situation with output regulation whereby practitioners are supported in monitoring themselves through a process of ongoing peer review; and the public is empowered to become more selective through education in what to reasonably expect from counsellors and psychotherapists.

4. Medical hegemony argument

That the medical model of the NHS can be extended to cover all forms of independent/private therapeutic practice (as the state has no other model available to it with which to establish hegemony) without violating the public's right to choose practitioners who do not define them as patients and offer a variety of other models for human wellbeing and development.

5. 'War on your behalf argument'

That there is sufficient publicly available evidence (if it exists it has yet to be produced) of counsellors and psychotherapists abusing clients on a scale that warrants the costs (financial, political, cultural and psychological) of state intervention, with the further assumption that such intervention can actually pre-empt and prevent abuse (for which again there is no evidence). Such crusading zeal on behalf of a public supposedly widely at risk from dangerous therapists could be read as a convenient diversion of attention away from more truly mass level forms of distress and disturbance that therapists do actually resonate with and bring into awareness. Note the microcos-

mic parallel here with the macrocosmic Bush/Blair obsessional 'war on terror', with its diversion of attention away from incontestable climate change and the associated impending planetary level disasters.

6. Bystander argument

That state regulation is inevitable, whereas actually this self-same message constitutes a powerful trance induction towards bystanding behaviour. This mantra, frequently repeated among counsellors and psychotherapists, is pitched to simultaneously play on fear and relieve guilt and anxiety by legitimising apathy and inaction. For professions that purport to be in the business of reducing anxiety and helplessness such a stance is massively incongruent with the core assignment.

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