

# COUNSELLING ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES

*Counselling and Psychotherapy with Refugees.* By Dick Blackwell. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005. 124 pp. £14.95 pb.

This brief and deceptively simple book tells you everything you will need to think about if you wish to offer a talking therapy to asylum seekers and refugees. It isn't a 'how to' book: it 'is not intended as a prescription for how to do therapy with refugees' (p. 102), but it contains within its pages an astonishing wealth of informed thought, concisely and accessibly presented. Barely a word is wasted and a complex and, to many, an apparently unmanageable, unthinkable area of work, is successfully described. The book is divided into four parts, each consisting of three or four short chapters. Parts 2 and 3, the core of the book, outline the experience of the asylum seeker refugee and the therapist working with this client group, each from four perspectives: political, cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic. The experiences of asylum seekers and the impact on the therapist of working with this client group are set in the context of two ever-present external realities: first the nature of the experiences from which the asylum seeker has fled, and as Blackwell emphasizes: 'it is important to remember that many of the experiences of refugees are truly horrific' (p. 80) and, second, the continuing and often equally though differently, traumatic uncertainty of the asylum process in this country. Thus, as well as describing

ways of working with asylum seekers, this book challenges an accepted orthodoxy in counselling and psychotherapy trainings and discourse:

Influenced by trainings that emphasise the importance of intrapsychic dynamics, individual behaviour or interpersonal communication, it may be a huge step for a therapist to take, to enter the world of politics. Even those trainings that consider culture and transcultural issues as important are seldom able to engage directly with the political world, its impact on personality development and its manifestation in and influence on the therapeutic encounter.

Psychotherapy is always a political activity because the construction of intersubjective meaning always has political implications and cannot escape ideological influences. However, this fact is generally ignored or denied within the psychotherapeutic discourse. (p. 29)

There is a clear and immediate demand for knowledge of the world and a consequent political perspective when working therapeutically with refugees and asylum seekers. Blackwell would argue further that 'the sublime state of therapeutic and political neutrality' (p. 64) is always unrealistic, whoever the client group: 'There are, no doubt, those who believe it is possible to be apolitical, or politically neutral, as a therapist. I do not believe this is possible' (p. 63). The relevance of such issues to the practice of counselling and psychotherapy, perhaps more easily set aside in other settings, is urgently confronted in work with asylum seekers and refugees.

Further complications of the work addressed in the final section of the book include working with interpreters and the issue of supervision. My own experience has been that working with interpreters has ranged from the frustratingly *unworkable* to experiences that seem deeply therapeutic to each of the three protagonists in the drama of the therapeutic encounter. At its heart, what we call counselling or therapy is really a very simple thing: to be with; to attend to; to listen carefully and to comment accurately. However it is also a process that is extraordinarily difficult to quantify or measure. It may or may not be more or less helpful. My experience of working cross-culturally, with no common language, and with deeply traumatized individuals, has reminded me that, whoever the client group, we can certainly never take for granted the outcome and perhaps more rarely than we imagine can we be sure of what is being communicated. It is too easy to make assumptions when the native tongue is shared:

One of the great myths of modern counselling and psychotherapy is the overestimation of the extent to which we can ever really understand another person. In much counselling and psychotherapy the experiences of therapist and clients have enough in common to support the myth. Encounters with members of a culture which is significantly different from our own make us more aware, and perhaps uncomfortably aware, of how difficult the task of understanding another, or even understanding ourselves, actually is. (p. 70)

Perhaps the most interesting challenge of the work is addressed in Chapter 11, which looks at the intrapsychic experience of the practitioner:

Very few counsellors or psychotherapists who come to work at the Medical Foundation have very much idea of what, at a deep intrapsychic

level, motivates them to engage in work with survivors of torture and organised violence. This suggests that such motivation exists in areas of the psyche barely touched on in training analysis or in previous psychotherapy or counselling.

It further suggests that undertaking this sort of work is a way of engaging with some of these outstanding issues. Most significantly it also suggests that the defensive structure surrounding these unrevealed areas of intrapsychic life may be particularly strong, deeply unconscious and hedged around with powerful resistance. This in turn may lead to a whole range of strange thinking, feeling and behaving in relation to the work which can be quite inaccessible to reflection and self-analysis. (p. 77)

Again, from my own experience, it is unlikely to be a coincidence that I began my training as a group analyst after having worked with asylum seekers and refugees for around 18 months. I believe that the challenges of the work are liable either to strengthen existing defences or to demand a more searching level of self-knowledge.

And finally, there is an extremely useful and important section at the end of the book, comprising Appendix B, 'Resources', which lists national and international organizations working with or for asylum seekers and refugees, and Appendix A, 'Further reading', a challenging and tantalizing reading list, divided into 10 separately headed groups. I was particularly interested in the second group: 'Political context and history', which includes Eric Hobsbawm's four volumes of history, written over 32 years, covering the period from 1789 to 1991, a quartet that 'shows how the industrialisation and development of Europe is inextricably linked with the colonisation of the "Third World"' (p. 109). I have never read any Hobsbawm, indeed, I struggled, a school pupil, to get to grips with History. It reminded me that despite a free and extensive education in the brief years of plenty for all which succeeded the radical reforms to education, health and

social care following the second world war, I tend to conceptualize my personal bank of knowledge as islands floating in a sea of ignorance. It made me wonder if *one* of my unconscious motives for embarking on work with asylum seekers and refugees was a wish to make some bridges between the islands: a rather dramatic way to connect. A simpler way of saying this is that there is so much more that I don't know than I do. But that, in the modern world, is true for everyone. There no longer exists the Renaissance Man . . . or Woman.

A close reading of this book might just serve to render thoughts of working with asylum seekers and refugees too daunting a

prospect. So my final thought is that not knowing *too* much, and not being very certain of very much, needn't debar one from embarking on such work. Not knowing has always been an essential starting point for the therapeutic practitioner. It is the preparedness to embark on the endeavour to know and understand something together which is at the heart of all therapeutic work. The importance and the helpfulness of this stance cannot be underestimated when working with asylum seekers and refugees.

Leonie Hilliard  
leonieh@talktalk.net