

SCoPEd: How counselling and psychotherapy found itself in the midst of an identity-crisis

Abstract

This paper offers a personal account of resisting the Scope of Practice and Education framework, developed by three of the United Kingdom's leading counselling and psychotherapy professional bodies, through the eyes of a practitioner who has recently entered the field. The author argues that the project's development is politically motivated, misaligned with therapeutic values and methodologically flawed.

KEYWORDS

ethics, methodology, politics, power, regulation, research, SCoPEd, values

In the short time since I qualified as a counsellor and psychotherapist, I have found myself perpetually trying to make sense of a complex, divided and volatile professional landscape, and find my place within it.

Prior to training, I had a difficult experience which shook my trust in the profession: my first therapist was not a member of any professional body, leaving me without any course of action when I wished to make a complaint. It was from this frame of reference that I entered the profession with the belief that statutory regulation was necessary to protect clients.

As I began to explore the history of the talking therapies in this country, previous movement towards regulation and the political shadow which is cast over the entire conversation, I came to understand that the debate around regulation of the profession is not as straightforward as I had first thought. There seemed to be a hidden divide between those in favour of regulation and those against it, which, in my experience of interacting with therapists online, could sometimes become vitriolic and personal. It seems to me that there are legitimate concerns about client safety and training standards from pro-regulation therapists, and genuine questions about homogeneity of the profession and top-down control from those who hold the opposing view. I felt it was important to learn more about what statutory regulation might look like—after all, client-protection ought not to come at the expense of diverse and creative practice.

I observed the actions of people in positions of power, whom I had hoped could become fair and impartial regulators, and I found myself having to reassess my position. Over the last year particularly, my eyes have been opened to the dangers of leaving decisions about our future in the hands of those whose motivations are political rather than therapeutic.

In 2018, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) faced a sea of criticism in response to proposed guidelines for depression, which recommended cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and medication as the favoured interventions for all forms of depression, overlooking other talking therapies entirely. Problems were found with NICE's methodology and transparency in developing the guidelines (Mahase, 2018). As a newly qualified therapist, I was shocked that a public body would create a document so out of step with the reality of talking therapies, and I began to question whether any government-appointed agency would really be able to (or wish to) govern and maintain a profession which provides the breadth of therapeutic service we currently are able to offer clients. Crucially, I also began to doubt whether the therapeutic relationship—the vessel by which most talking therapies foster

healing and change—would be valued and protected by statutory regulators. Those stakes are huge, and my instincts say that it is a high-risk gamble.

Then came the Scope of Practice and Education (SCoPEd).

This collaborative project between professional bodies the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), the UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) and the British Psychoanalytic Council (BPC) first came to my attention in April 2018 (BACP, 2018). Little information was available at the time, but it was billed as a framework to map the profession—to provide clarity for clients and employers, to help them find their way through our broad and labyrinthine professional landscape, and to find the services most suited to their needs. I was cautiously optimistic.

I felt that offering guidance and education to the public would help clients to make informed choices, in keeping with our collective ethical values of justice, respect and autonomy. I believe that clients have a right to know that the titles of counsellor and psychotherapist are unprotected, and this could have been a great opportunity to provide clarity about the qualifications necessary to be recognised by a professional body as a qualified therapist. I expected the benchmarks of competency to be spelled out; I did not expect the benchmarks to be arbitrarily and unilaterally redefined.

The link to a draft of SCoPEd (BACP, 2019), along with a limited consultation form, landed in the inboxes (or, more accurately, junk folders) of members of the three organisations in January 2019.

To my horror, the SCoPEd project amounted to a table, in three columns, dividing and defining the roles of “Qualified Counsellor,” “Advanced Counsellor” and “Psychotherapist.”

My first objection to this concept is very simple: a framework whose primary aim is to map something—to provide clarity about something—should present an accurate picture of the landscape as it stands, yet currently the terms “counsellor” and “psychotherapist” are widely used synonymously in the UK profession.

If I were a client seeking therapy for the first time and I read the SCoPEd framework, I would probably assume that I could trust this authoritative source to give me accurate information about what I will get if I were to hire a psychotherapist, for example. But these are unprotected titles and at present anybody, with or without level-seven training, can permissibly call themselves a psychotherapist. In my view, the framework insinuates minimum requirements to use the terms, which is actively misleading and therefore ethically questionable.

The professional bodies had an opportunity here to highlight the assurances that come with choosing a professional-body-registered therapist as opposed to an unregistered one, providing clarity about the current system both to benefit clients and support the work of their membership. I think if the true motivations of SCoPEd were to map the profession for the benefit of the public and employers, this is exactly what they would have done.

So, if their motivations are not as they seem, what is the purpose of SCoPEd? In an *Alliance for Counselling* blog post, Denis Postle (2019) posited that the reasoning given by the three bodies simply served to obscure two less palatable motivations: first, to place themselves in a position of influence in preparation for state regulation; and second, to bolster their own accredited training courses. When we consider these arguments, SCoPEd begins to look increasingly self-serving, and in the interests of neither therapists nor clients.

In 2009, the Health Professions Council's consultation on statutory regulation, which included proposals to differentiate between counselling and psychotherapy, was met with strong opposition from the BACP; they argued: “BACP takes an evidence-based position that there is no difference between counselling and psychotherapy . . . A search of the literature reinforces this position. In terms of role, value and effectiveness, we thus posit that each occupational area has equal value” (BACP, 2009, p. 7).

Many of the arguments the BACP made in 2009 are identical to the criticisms of SCoPEd today, including that the differentiation misleads the public and that, contrary to the BACP's current assertion that career prospects will be improved, employment opportunities will actually decrease for counsellors, who have been portrayed in this framework as the poor relation of the talking therapies, unable to independently assess a client's suitability for counselling (competency 2.1) or work therapeutically with ruptures in the relationship (competency 3.10).

In my view, this remarkable volte-face from the BACP can be nothing other than a politically motivated repositioning designed to serve the interests of the organisations and high-level stakeholders. How else can a position change so rapidly and inexplicably?

The paternalistic and hegemonic way the framework has been created is so strongly at odds with the philosophy of counselling and psychotherapy that I worry for the future of the profession. Is this where we are headed? Has the profession forgotten how to listen to and respect the other? We all know that the power imbalance in the therapeutic relationship must not be used to advance our own interests at the expense of our clients, and it seems to me that this ethical imperative must extend to those in positions of power within the profession.

The competencies chosen as relevant by the creators of SCoPEd appear to favour the theories and processes most associated with psychoanalysis. SCoPEd fails to mention a vast number of competencies associated with other talking therapies, such as creative interventions, bodywork, spirituality, etc. This raises the question of how we see ourselves as practitioners. Are we healthcare professionals? Do we align ourselves with the medical model? Or are we something else entirely?

I feel that we have reached a crisis point in our professional history; this debate has seemingly been under the radar for so long that the professional bodies have seized an opportunity to claim ownership of counselling and psychotherapy and make it what they want it to be. If therapists do not want the scope of their practice squeezed into the ill-fitting box of mechanised, solution-focused practice, I would argue that now is the time to reclaim ownership of the profession. To that end, I think we need to dismantle SCoPEd and go back to the drawing board.

I now want to shift the focus away from the detail of the SCoPEd findings and examine the process by which it came into being. In my view, the way the project has been structured, managed and executed undermines its entire premise and renders the findings invalid.

It stands to reason that a document mapping the profession should be representative of the therapies and therapists who will be impacted by it. While the BACP has stated that the framework aims to be indicative rather than imposed (Forshaw, 2018), it has also made no secret of the fact that the framework could provide an influencing function for the bodies in the event of statutory regulation. I feel very strongly that if the model for regulation is unrepresentative and unfair, then regulation itself will be unrepresentative and unfair.

With this in mind, I find it astonishing that the three professional bodies have failed to invite wider collaboration at a developmental level. I cannot see a justifiable reason to omit the views of important Professional Standards Authority-registered counselling bodies such as the National Counselling Society (NCS). In fact, the NCS has written an open letter to the BACP calling these tactics into question (NCS, 2019) and has been consulting widely with its own membership on their wishes for the future of the profession—something the BACP has singularly failed to do. The exclusive and nebulous introduction of SCoPEd does not chime with the proposed aims of clarity and furthering the profession.

Of the fourteen Expert Reference Group (ERG) members tasked with creating the framework, eight are psychoanalysts and/or psychodynamic therapists. Person-centred therapy (among other notable modalities, including body psychotherapy, existential psychotherapy and Gestalt) is not represented in the group at all. Given this outrageously skewed group of therapists, it comes as no surprise to me that the framework places high value on traditionally psychodynamic processes such as working with transference and unconscious processes, while omitting valid and valuable interventions intrinsic to other modalities.

The selection of the Roth and Pilling methodology (Roth & Pilling, 2008) is controversial, not least because the so-called independent chair of the ERG, Alessandra Lemma (a psychoanalyst and BPC member) has previously co-authored a paper with Roth and Pilling, investigating psychoanalytic competencies (Lemma, Roth, & Pilling, 2008)—hardly independent!

I am not an expert in research ethics, but I have read the SCoPEd methodology paper (BACP, BPC, & UKCP, 2018) and I am struck by two things—first, the bias of the independent chair is not accounted for as a limitation of the research; and second, the suitability of the methodology for the task of identifying competencies in relational and humanistic therapies is not evidenced or even explored. In two lines the methodology describes its previous use “identifying manualised treatments” (p. 5) but does not demonstrate how this might effectively be adapted to humanistic approaches. I do not see how so little attention to the modality selection can be considered ethical research practice.

The BACP claim that the terms “Qualified Counsellor,” “Advanced Counsellor” and “Psychotherapist” merely represent points of entry and are not used as titles. However, the literature they use to evidence the differentiation does use the terms as titles, and this disparity is also unaccounted for. This seems to be a case of using cherry-picked evidence to create narratives which suit the aims of the group. I believe Andrew Samuels (2019) is right to call this political manoeuvre a “psychoanalytic coup” on the part of the profession.

I am idealistic. I do not pretend to be anything else. I want to see a unified profession where all modalities and all titles are treated with respect and fairness. Providing clarity to the public about the differing levels of training in the profession is honourable and just, but to split this down falsely constructed arbitrary lines between professional titles is damaging and wrong.

Most of all, the way power and political positioning has been used in the creation of SCoPEd runs contrary to the essence of counselling and psychotherapy. Our collective value base should be evident at an embodied level throughout the profession. If our therapeutic principles are discarded when we find ourselves in a position of power, then what are they worth when we are with clients? Congruence remains at the heart of counselling and psychotherapy, and its necessity extends far beyond the therapy room.

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