

# COUNSELLING, CLASS AND POLITICS: UNDECLARED INFLUENCES IN THERAPY

Edited by Kearney, A.

Manchester, UK: PCCS Books, 1996. ISBN-10: 1898059098, ISBN-13: 978-1898059097

## 1 | WHO I AM AND WHAT I DO?

My name is Ruth Smith and I am qualified counsellor, with a master's degree in Counselling and Psychotherapy Practice. My main area of interest is social justice counselling, specifically around promoting awareness amongst white counsellors about "race" and recognition of the influence of politics within therapeutic practice. My counselling practice focused on trauma counselling with refugee and asylum seekers. I am currently taking a break from practice to focus on my first year of a PhD in Social Justice and Inclusion. I am researching white trainee counsellors' perception of race. I live in Wales.

## 2 | A BOOK I HAVE PARTICULARLY BEEN IMPACTED BY

Anne Kearney's book *Counselling, Class and Politics: Undeclared Influences in Therapy*, was first published in 1996 and republished last year. A slim tome of less than 100 pages, it is written in accessible language and is suitable for the seasoned practitioner and the new trainee or as a manual for trainers. Comprising eight chapters, which expand on the titular themes, it also includes a rumination on the potentially radical nature of Rogerian theory, the positionality of the counsellor and potential implications of the professionalisation of counselling via accreditation. Each chapter presents the reader with opportunities for reflection with questions presented for consideration; these could be used for individual contemplation or with groups of trainees. In short, it provides an eloquent refutation to the notion that counselling can ever be a politically neutral process.

## 3 | HOW THE BOOK SPOKE TO ME

If the personal really is political, then it seems ironic that a profession that focuses on the personal oftentimes actively separates itself from the political. This book provides a much-needed dialogue around the subject of class, politics and counselling. Kearney herself states that she felt this was a neglected area in counselling training and practice, something which resonated with me as I felt (and continue to feel) the same way. During training, talk around politics was limited to infrequent seminars. My personal experience is that these were met with indifference and were largely seen as irrelevant to practice and the therapeutic relationship itself. Indeed, when I provided a series of seminars to trainee counsellors, there was a collective groan when I stated that the topic for the following week would be politics. Kearney challenges this notion and ably demonstrates how the counselling profession and practitioners are influenced by the political climate and their positioning in the world, even if they aren't aware of it. Working therapeutically with refugees

and asylum seekers was often an isolating experience and within this specialism the separation of politics and the therapeutic relationship was not possible. Indeed, politics was integral to the therapy—be it the political dynamic of the client's country of origin or their feelings around navigating the complicated asylum process in this country. *Counselling, Class and Politics* was an important accompaniment to this work as it gave guidance and even a sense of companionship during this challenging work. Most importantly, it gave me permission to actively engage my political self with my therapeutic practice, to listen to my clients' experiences in an open and politically informed way. It did so through the questions posed by Kearney in each chapter that challenge the reader to reflect on their assumptions. This allowed an opportunity to reflect on my own positionality as a white counsellor working with clients from various ethnic minorities and how my anti-racist feminist self could be congruently incorporated into my practice. Whilst it was not my place to preach my politics, it was my responsibility to be fully conscious of how politics affected my clients' lives, my practice and our therapeutic relationship. This book provides a path to achieving this in a congruent way.

The other important aspect of this book is the discourse around class. As a working-class trainee and then qualified practitioner, the profession itself can feel centred on the presumption that we are all middle-class. This can demonstrate itself in the economic expectations placed upon us (for training, continuing professional development, personal therapy, supervision, etc.), which can feel like barriers to lower-income, working-class trainees and practitioners. It was refreshing to read someone openly talking about this unacknowledged aspect, presenting an argument that class *does* matter and that it *is* influential whether you are the therapist or the client. My heavily annotated copy is littered with emphatic, highlighted and underlined YES!'s throughout, but they are most frequently found during the discussion around class. These personal inscriptions were born out of a sense of relief that I was not the only one to think these things and that Kearney had eloquently and unapologetically articulated feelings that had been caught in my throat for so long.

#### 4 | WHAT DOES THE BOOK TELL US ABOUT PSYCHOTHERAPY AS A POLITICAL ACTIVITY?

*Class, Politics and Counselling* unflinchingly argues that psychotherapy is political activity even when (or perhaps especially when!) the political dimension is actively denied or rejected. Anne Kearney encourages the reader to reflect and to challenge their unconscious and conscious political and class positioning and to consider how the profession itself can be political.

#### 5 | WHY OTHERS MIGHT READ THE BOOK

Given the current political climate around Brexit and Donald Trump's presidency, it may seem that there is no escape from politics. In fact, it may be even more tempting to withdraw from political discourse. However, on reading this book it becomes clear that we, as individuals, can run but we can't hide from the political dimension of our lives or that of our clients' lives. Perhaps funding has been cut to your organisation, or your client's benefits have been stopped, or maybe you are a working-class practitioner operating in a middle-class profession. Alternatively, you may feel politics needs to be left at the door, that it has no place within therapeutic practice and even has the potential to be detrimental to the therapeutic relationship. This book will give you an accessible introduction to understanding how politics and class operate overtly and covertly within all our lives and present practical ways in which to challenge, question and address the reality of politics within counselling and psychotherapy. In doing so, those "undeclared influences" that we all possess may have the opportunity to become more transparent. Maybe then the personal will become unapologetically political.

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**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

**Ruth Smith** is 34 and lives in Carmarthenshire with her husband and son. She qualified as a counsellor in 2016, gained a MA in Counselling and Psychotherapy Practice in 2018 and is now in the first year of a PhD in Social Justice and Inclusion at the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David. Her PhD is looking at white trainee counsellors' perception of 'race'. She worked as a trauma counsellor with survivors of childhood sexual abuse, domestic abuse and with refugees and asylum seekers.