
COMMENTARY

On ‘Southern Psychotherapies’: Are they psychotherapies at all?

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This commentary is based on Keith’s article, ‘Southern Psychotherapies’, published originally in 2012, which can be found here: <https://ojs.aut.ac.nz/psychotherapy-politics-international/article/view/379>.

When Keith agreed to take over from me as editor of *Psychotherapy and Politics International* (*PPI*), I was delighted: first of all because I knew that he would be able to make a go of it, but secondly, and very importantly, because it meant a transfer of the journal’s centre of gravity from North to South, from the Atlantic to the Pacific. I always took the word ‘International’ in the title very seriously, but I also always struggled to make it a reality: mainly through my lack of contacts, *PPI* was very light on material outside the Anglo-American sphere, and material about other parts of the world was often written by Anglos who knew what was happening there. There were some exceptions—getting Augustine Nwoye on board, for instance, was a great boon—but we seemed to have hit a wall.

Keith’s editorship almost immediately changed this situation; and the paper I have been asked to discuss demonstrates why and how. Certainly, it was important that Keith was *there*, living and working in Aotearoa New Zealand and networking across the whole Pacific region; but even more significant was his attitude towards his new location, and his immediate commitment to forming a relationship with the indigenous Māori nation and its culture.

Reading the paper, one immediately comes up against his adoption of the Māori form of self-introduction, the pepeha. ‘Against’ is in some ways the right word: I was surprised and quite doubtful about what in many contexts would be seen as an appropriation of indigenous culture, a form of colonialism. So far as I can tell this is not how things are understood in Aotearoa New Zealand: the power relationship between Europeans and Māori was sufficiently more balanced than in most colonial situations for the Treaty between the two to be a living reality, and for the adoption of Māori terms and customs to be understood as

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respectful rather than appropriative. There is a great distance to go in most colonised countries before this could be at all possible.

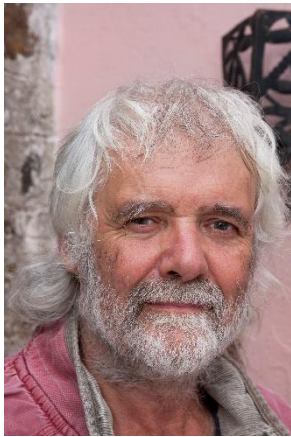
I have a deeper issue with the topic of the paper, though, which is harder to put to rest. Keith's central question can be expressed as: What would constitute a Southern psychotherapy? But posing the question in this way seems to me to re-install the colonialist model which he is trying to challenge. 'Psychotherapy' is a Western/Northern term (a complex and much contested one, as the paper acknowledges), and wholly embedded in Western/Northern culture; it neither translates readily into indigenous languages and cultures, nor makes a good translation of parallel terms from those languages and cultures into our own. Rather than invoking the notion of 'Southern psychotherapies', would it not be better to think in terms of a conversation between psychotherapy and various Southern approaches to emotional distress? There is something particularly colonising, it seems to me, about the suggestion of including Māori philosophy 'as a research methodology in courses or papers' in academic institutions, which would surely mean turning it into an interesting variation on Northern academic thinking rather than an outright challenge to it.

One of the strongest points Keith makes, I think, is in his suggestion (following Raewyn Connell) that a distinctive element of Northern theory, including psychological theory, is its *universalism*, its one-size-fits-all assumption which leads to Procrustean measures. But even this idea requires some complication: on the one hand, the dismantling of universalism is well underway on Western/Northern intellectual culture—while on the other hand, surely some indigenous cultures are universalist, in the very simple sense that they are unaware (pre-contact) of the possibility of alternative theories?

Keith mentions in this paper but does not fully discuss another crucial characteristic of Northern psychotherapy: its fervent *individualism*, the assumption that the object of study is the single person who presents themselves in the consulting room—or at the most, the two single persons of client and practitioner. Indigenous approaches tend strongly towards the opposite assumption—that an individual's distress is the expression of a disturbance in the collective field. Again, Northern psychotherapy is starting to catch up with this viewpoint, especially through ecosystemic approaches.

I have a strong feeling that reading this now, Keith will have little or no disagreement with my comments. The paper dates from 2012, and his thinking, together with general Northern thinking about both psychotherapy and colonialism, has developed a good deal since then. So, I am certainly not aiming to start an argument!—but rather to celebrate Keith's pioneering work in connecting psychotherapy, politics, and Southern perspectives, both through his own writing and through the masterly way in which he has steered *Psychotherapy and Politics International*. Thank you, Keith, and have a good rest.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Nick Totton is a body psychotherapist, ecotherapist, trainer, and supervisor in private practice in the UK. He has published twelve books, including *Psychotherapy and Politics* (Sage, 2000), *Wild Therapy: Rewilding Inner and Outer Worlds* (2nd ed., PCCS Books, 2021), *Embodied Relating: The Ground of Psychotherapy* (Karnac, 2015), and *Sailing to Bohemia: The Vision of Freedom from Work-Discipline* (independently published, 2023), and edited several more. He was the founding editor and later consulting editor of *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, and is a past chair of Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility and the

Psychotherapy and Counselling Union. Nick has a daughter and two grandchildren. He lives in Sheffield with his partner and grows flowers and vegetables.