

Social justice and remembering “the personal is political” in counselling and psychotherapy: So, what can therapists do?

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Abstract

This brief contribution argues for the importance of a social justice perspective in counselling and psychotherapy, particularly within the current international socio-political context. Much has been said about social justice over recent years in the fields of psychology, psychotherapy and counselling. Professionals and academics have expressed some concerns about what it might actually mean, or how difficult it might be in practice to engage with this perspective. In this paper, the activist phrase “the personal is political” (Hanisch, 1970) is used to illustrate the way in which a social justice approach to counselling and psychotherapy does not need to be complicated, but rather a foregrounding of a particular understanding of well-being and the people we work with. Following this, some concrete and straightforward suggestions for how therapists might begin to act on their social justice values are made.

KEYWORDS

austerity, political, social justice, therapy

1 | INTRODUCTION

There is accumulating evidence that the current socio-political climate in the United Kingdom (UK) is having a range of implications for the physical and emotional well-being of individuals. The UK is used as a specific example here, but these comments have broader application internationally. Since the global financial crash of 2007/8, the UK, and much of Europe has been in a period of economic “austerity,” which has translated to cuts in public spending on sectors like welfare and health care covering responsibility for multiple local services, as well as deflation to wages. Similar patterns of cuts and austerity measures are also present in many American States. In the UK, there is an increasing need for food aid (Lambie-Mumford & Dowler, 2014), and there are significant problems of fuel poverty (Roberts, Vera-Toscano, & Phimister, 2015). In addition to any potential physical impacts of this, there are often psychological and emotional implications. For example, Liddell and Guiney (2015) show a relationship between living in a cold, damp household and problems with mental health issues, while Purdam, Garrett, and Esmail (2016) describe a relationship between food insecurity and use of food banks with feelings of embarrassment and shame. Research looking specifically at the impact of particular welfare reform policies

has documented perceived impacts of such changes on emotional well-being (Winter, Burman, Hanley, Kalambouka, & McCoy, 2016). In a similar period, there has been increasing talk in counselling, psychology and psychotherapy of the importance of “social justice” (Cutts, 2013; Winter, Maciagowska, Mangan, & Toor, 2018).

2 | WHAT IS SOCIAL JUSTICE?

...social justice is both a goal of action and the process of action itself, which involves an emphasis on equity or equality for individuals in society in terms of access to a number of different resources and opportunities, the right to self-determination or autonomy and participation in decision-making, freedom from oppression, and a balancing of power across society. (Cutts, 2013, pp. 9–10)

Within the disciplines of counselling and psychotherapy, social justice is about acknowledging the importance of equality (both in terms of the division of or access to resources and in terms of our

relationships: Winter, 2018), and working towards increasing equality, minimising power imbalances and challenging discrimination or oppression in our professional roles. Following discussions in and outside therapy about this subject, I am aware that many academic definitions of “social justice” can feel quite abstract or diffuse.

Hanisch (1970), using the term “the personal is political,” talked about women’s therapy groups, and the way in which these personal spaces, designed for sharing and emotional processing of personal issues, were also fundamentally political. This idea captures a simple way of understanding social justice as applied to counselling and psychotherapy. Firstly, though we are doing something very personal, often working with people at individual or small group levels, considering issues relating to the individual or small group, these issues are so intertwined with our broader social and political environments that they are very hard to disentangle or separate (Prilleltensky, 2013). Secondly, our work can have a political function if it challenges traditionally unequal structures and facilitates new power relations. This broader understanding of politics underpins the statement “the personal is political” (Hanisch, 2006); what we are doing as counsellors and therapists may not necessarily be about influencing electoral or Governmental Politics, but it certainly can be about power relations (Proctor, 2017). “Social justice” in counselling and psychotherapy does not have to be something complicated or obtuse. Simply put, it is *an acknowledgment that the work we do occurs in a socio-political context which it cannot be easily disconnected from (and therefore that things like power, discrimination and oppression are important) and that this work can have political implications*. Social justice work then becomes about remembering and articulating these values in our practice (see Milton, 2018).

3 | “SIMPLE” SOCIAL JUSTICE STEPS (...OR PERHAPS ONE PLACE TO START)

Given the impact of the current socio-political climate, social justice is potentially particularly important for our professions at the moment. But what can therapists actually do? Research has documented the barriers professionals cite to social justice action, including lack of time, worries about implications of speaking up or behaving differently, and a lack of clarity about what social justice actions we can actually take (Schulze, Winter, Woods, & Tyldesley, 2018; Winter & Hanley, 2015). Without wanting to minimise these barriers, I do want to suggest that there are at least a small number of concrete ways that therapists can begin to adopt a social justice perspective in their work, if they wish to.

1. Self-reflection on power and privilege

Personal and professional development is a core element of practice in therapy (Rose, 2017). This can, and in my mind should, quite easily incorporate a social justice perspective. It is important that we reflect, for example, on why we have chosen to train in counselling, or what our reaction to a specific client or presenting issue might be. It is also important within this that we attend to and become sensitised towards issues of power, inequality and privilege in our personal experiences and narratives. For example, I am White and heterosexual and have been privileged in a multitude of ways in life.

I am also a woman and have some experience of prejudice which I can draw upon. All of this will and has influenced why I trained to become a counselling psychologist, as well as how I react, respond to and engage with clients and particular presenting issues. Therapists can therefore think about the different types of power they might hold in relationships and what impact this might have (Proctor, 2017). This self-reflection is not easy by any means, but it is a relatively straightforward way of starting to engage with social justice practices in counselling and psychotherapy.

2. Social justice perspectives in our formulations

Formulation in counselling and allied disciplines is our understanding of our client and the reason they have come to therapy, often integrating what we have learnt about them in our sessions and from any other information we have been provided with, with theoretical perspectives and research evidence (Johnstone, 2017). Though most texts on formulation tend to emphasise the need to include reference to social factors (Corrie & Lane, 2006), it can be hard for therapists to do so, and to avoid neglecting to emphasise social factors in their communication of this formulation (though they are normally included). It is far too easy as a therapist to make someone feel like the problem they have come to you about, and the solution for feeling better is all located within themselves (Prilleltensky, Docecki, Frieden, & Wong, 2007). It is my opinion that this (probably in most cases at least) comes from a very well-intentioned place; we emphasise the parts of the narrative which we think we can have some influence over or work on in therapy. From a social justice perspective, however, simply making sure that you explicitly acknowledge with clients where there are socio-political factors at play in their well-being is powerful and communicates something very important about how we understand distress. Neglecting to explicitly say to your client “one factor which seems important here is the problems you are experiencing with the changes to your benefits,” because perhaps there is little we can do beyond writing supportive letters, may have a significant impact on how that person thinks about their distress. Milton (2018) provides extremely useful case examples of how social justice might manifest in our individual therapeutic work.

3. Collaboration as a matter of principle

There is a large body of literature around collaboration and shared decision-making (including Cooper, Dryden, Martin, & Papayianni, 2016), and research shows that agreeing on goals and collaboration enhances outcomes of therapy (Tryon & Winograd, 2011). From a social justice perspective, it is essential to consider this element of the therapeutic relationship from a position of principles as well as pragmatism. Returning to the idea of equality, it is important to reflect on how to treat the other as someone with equal moral worth as a human being (Winter, 2018), thus enhancing relational equality. Counsellors and psychotherapists might think about small actions or communications within their individual therapeutic work which might communicate this valuing, not necessarily because it is a useful “skill”

in counselling, but because it enhances equality and therefore contributes towards social justice (Winter, Guo, Wilk, & Hanley, 2016).

4. Don't forget the community

Lastly, therapists should not forget the broader resources that individuals can tap into, which are often located within broader community structures. Is individual therapy always the answer? Based on your understanding of your client and why they have sought out help, could they benefit from attending community groups or getting involved in broader action and activities, either alongside or instead of engaging with a therapist? Understanding that therapy is not always the most useful solution, (and that therefore the individual needs to change in some way), seems an important step in putting social justice principles into action.

4 | FINAL WORDS

This has only been a brief piece, therefore much has gone unsaid and much more could be explained. I would encourage interested readers to follow some of the links in the reference list below for more ideas and information. I do not claim that the points above will be entirely easy for anyone to put into practice, but they might be a good place to start if you want to think about a social justice perspective in therapy.

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BIOGRAPHY

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