



The last two years have seen a resurgence of activism and political engagement among psychotherapists, counsellors and psychologists. It has grown from the ground up, provoked by political and economic pressures that are affecting therapists and their clients alike - cuts in access to therapy services, the increasing impact of austerity policies on already vulnerable groups, and a narrowing of access to jobs and courses for trainee therapists with limited means of support.

This article is in the form of a discussion between us about the major sea change we see occurring and the place for political activism within the profession. We start with our histories of political activism, to put what we say in context.

**Juliet:** I've always been interested in human rights and organisational aspects of how we care for each other. But now, when we are facing the level of crisis in our profession that we are seeing, both for clients and for professionals, it is impossible to ignore the outside world. Elizabeth Cotton's extensive

research in *The Future of Therapy*<sup>1</sup> shows us what is happening. She predicts that the UK could be within a decade of genuine therapeutic professions dying out and the advent of 'a mental health service made up of tick boxes and compulsory wellness with psychoanalysis relegated to a heritage industry'.

It is widely acknowledged that there is a crisis in mental health services, yet the Government is not looking at the wider picture of how we care for each other in our society, and not consulting with professionals that work in these services. Instead, ideology, rather than in-depth engagement, is driving mental health policy. We strive with our clients to understand, to build bridges and to enable healing and change. If we are constantly badgered into being more money efficient, we will lose the basic security and trust in what we do that enables therapeutic practice to flourish. I love this profession, imperfect and frustrating as it is. I believe the core principles - that we can help each other, that we can work deeply and relationally - are worth preserving. So my fight for the profession has come out of a love for it.

**Richard:** For me, personal change and social change have always been interlinked processes. Our brains and psyches grow and develop through relationships, and I would argue that the current social epidemics of anxiety, depression and distress, particularly among young people, reflect the distortion and breakdown of social relationships in a toxic political environment. In my work as a school counsellor, I see every day how my child clients and their families are affected by social and economic policies eroding welfare support, increasing housing insecurity and exacerbating social division and exclusion. Psychologists for Social Change have highlighted the direct

'I love this profession,  
imperfect and  
frustrating  
as it is'



psychological harm caused by neoliberal 'austerity' policies that increase experiences of 'humiliation and shame, fear and distrust, instability and insecurity, isolation and loneliness, being trapped and powerless'.<sup>2</sup>

I need to regulate my anger, grief and sense of paralysing helplessness if I am to remain useful to my clients as their therapist, but it feels essential not to repress, split off or deny these damaging experiences affecting my clients. We need to find a way not only to think and speak as therapists about social issues, but to intervene in the wider social and political discourses.

### Solidarity and support

**Juliet:** Essentially, I see therapists and counsellors coming together to support each other and our clients by reasserting core ethical values of relationship-based therapies during very difficult times. Many counsellors, psychotherapists and psychoanalysts have been politically active and involved in the political arena for many years. But we are also seeing a younger generation of psychotherapists and counsellors who want to talk, know about the changes occurring and protect our profession. They recognise the urgency - well-established, respected courses are closing and it is becoming harder and harder for people to afford to learn the skills needed to join our profession. Many training courses have a large experiential component, while weighty fees and working voluntarily to build up clinical hours means that diversity in the profession is compromised. We are in real danger of relationship-based therapies becoming the exception. We need a sea change to turn the tide.

**Richard:** For me, it's more about a network of little streams with the potential to join and swell into a wider, stronger flow. While we need to insist that our work as therapists is properly valued, there is also an opportunity here for therapists to develop a stronger sense of solidarity with struggles outside the profession. That is how the Psychotherapy and Counselling Union (PCU) emerged - from many years of conversations between therapists feeling the need to hold a position that faces both 'inwards and outwards', along with a recognition that the 'inner' worlds of client and therapist cannot be viewed in separation from their 'outer' social and political contexts. We recognise that advocacy for therapists as a profession is inseparable from engagement with the social and political conditions of our work. Therapy is fundamentally an ethical, relational project that

embeds therapists in our society, and inherently challenges instrumental, objectifying models of the person. That is why the PCU's slogan is 'standing up for therapists and therapy'.

As individual therapists working with socially deprived clients, it is easy to become resigned to a position of helplessness in relation to the social systems affecting their lives. However, there is potential for us to make our voices heard, as a group, as advocates for our clients on the basis of our ethical stance towards the world. In some ways this might mean that, as well as therapeutic support, we try to cultivate a sense of solidarity between therapists and clients.

**Juliet:** One of the phrases that has struck me as important in these discussions is 'in solidarity'. I feel a little frightened of it, imagining perhaps something too solid, like pieces of metal being soldered to a heavy, weighty form, never to be detached. And I wonder, what is its relationship to empathy? Empathy, while expressing that you understand and feel a deep connection to someone else's feelings, can also provide the distance to be able to allow enough thinking space to make thoughtful connections that the other hasn't seen or thought of. But solidarity is something else. It is empathy, but it also surrenders to the acute vulnerability that another is feeling. A client's story highlighted this to me. She was from South America. She'd experienced a teenage break-up and was refusing to eat, as a result of her pain.

Her father, a socialist activist, responded by saying: 'Today, I will not eat too.' I expected a parent to comfort: 'Come on, eat, it will be OK.' A therapist's response might have been, 'You want to show me how sad and empty you feel and how brave you are in not looking for comfort in food.' I was surprised and delighted by her father's response and the deep connection and commitment he was expressing in this action. He wanted her to know that today her pain was his pain and he stood by her; that her vulnerability was his vulnerability and he could sit with her in that place.

**Richard:** I'm stirred and also unsettled by this story. Positioning ourselves 'in solidarity' with others, if it is not to be merely rhetoric, is challenging for therapists. It implies overriding the differences between us and taking an explicit position of support for - indeed identification with - an oppressed subject in a power struggle in opposition to their oppressor. As therapists, our habitual exploratory stance, acknowledging contradictions and ambiguities rather than absolutes, can be very useful when applied to the processes of political organising, but sometimes our wish to remain in a detached, reflective 'observing I' position can be defensive. It remains important to hold on to critical reflective capacities so as not to be swept away by group passions - we all see the shadow side of group identities in the current upsurge of populist racism and social

## ORGANISATIONS EXPLORING POLITICAL ASPECTS OF THERAPY, MENTAL HEALTH AND SOCIAL POLICY

- **Alliance for Counselling & Psychotherapy** <https://allianceblogs.wordpress.com>
- **Black, African & Asian Therapy Network** [www.baatan.org.uk](http://www.baatan.org.uk)
- **Climate Psychology Alliance** [www.climatepsychologyalliance.org](http://www.climatepsychologyalliance.org)
- **Counsellors Together UK** <http://ukcounsellors.co.uk>
- **The Future of Therapy** <https://thefutureoftherapy.org>
- **Mental Health Resistance Network** <http://mentalhealthresistance.org>
- **Pink Therapy** [www.pinktherapy.com](http://www.pinktherapy.com)
- **Psychologists for Social Change (formerly Psychologists Against Austerity)** [www.psychchange.org](http://www.psychchange.org)
- **Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility** [www.pcsr.org.uk](http://www.pcsr.org.uk)
- **The Psychotherapy and Counselling Union** <https://Psychotherapyandcounsellingunion.co.uk>
- **Radical Education Forum** <http://radicaleducationforum.tumblr.com>
- **Support Not Separation** <http://legalactionforwomen.net/category/support-not-separation>



polarisation. However, there's a life and energy in collectively affirming each other, in claiming identities as part of a group, which is a crucial part of being fully human.

I'm excited that we are beginning to see a growth in alliances between service user groups, such as the Mental Health Resistance Network, and those in the helping professions, including therapists.

## Risks and dilemmas

**Juliet:** Therapy groups are also starting to talk to each other. We are beginning to talk across organisations. Online forums are playing a role, where we can inform each other, discuss and learn. And we can be proactive as well as reactive. But I do think there are also difficulties and risks in becoming political. There are immediate risks such as burn out, frustration, fears of too much unity or too much separation. But more widely, traditionally our profession has been careful about what we reveal to clients. And, no doubt, we may be accused of not properly processing and acting out on the anger and frustrations of our profession. How can we ensure we do not undermine our professional positions if we have an open bias?

**Richard:** I think we are always political. Being 'apolitical' involves tacitly upholding the status quo. Issues of social power, privilege and inequality have always been present in our consulting rooms, and a few therapists have been open to exploring them. However, what has become more apparent is that, if we continue to see ourselves as in some way detached from social and political forces, therapy risks losing its viability as a profession, both ethically and as a way of making a living. Therefore, there is a need for therapists to become politically active as a group, to support each other and our clients.

It's true that, in the therapy session, we seek to cultivate an open, curious, accepting position towards our clients and their experiences, to help develop reflective capacities and possibilities. However, we are always situated in a social and political context: sometimes



'neutrality' can involve defensive avoidance of ethical choices.

These are intensely polarised and emotionally charged times. We can't avoid taking a position, but moral certainty easily becomes rigid and denies the humanity of the 'other side'. Whether on a demonstration or an online forum, I need to maintain an inner creative tension and hold an ethical position that leaves room for empathy with the other, self-doubt and the 'not knowing' that is a core value of relational therapies.

**Juliet:** Politics and psychotherapy are often at odds. Where neoliberal economic policy looks at outcomes and results, psychotherapies look toward process and integration. Current Government involvement in therapies is driven by statistics. In some ways, it is understandable that policies are developed from research. But this is fundamentally in conflict with most therapies, which allow space for uncertainty, the soul, the unknown and, again, the shadow. Statistics throw a glaringly bright light. We all know that how we read what we see is subjective, and it is the shadow as much as the illuminated that the psychotherapist takes into consideration - what is not seen, what we are not able to 'see', what it is hard to admit to, what the unconscious and collective unconscious holds. Therapists and counsellors are not being listened to by our politicians. This was painfully evident to me from the recent Health and Education Committees' joint enquiry into mental health in schools, where, in the two sessions, not one school counsellor was present. There is a fantastic cohort of services for children in schools that is being deeply undermined by cuts to school funding and almost ignored in the recent Government Green Paper on Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision.

**Richard:** Perhaps we need to make the success of school-based counselling central to our arguments for a decentralised, non-manualised, flexible, relationship-based approach. Those of us working as school counsellors come from a plurality of backgrounds and are a living rebuke to a medical-dominated 'one-size-fits-all' approach to mental health. But to do this we are going to have to network, organise and be far more assertive than we are used to being.

**Juliet:** I would like to see psychiatry, psychologists, psychoanalysts, therapists, counsellors and those in the caring

professions coming together in meaningful ways and in more active roles. We all know that relationships are complex and we need to look towards the bigger picture as well as the detail.

**Richard:** I think we need to continue building the nascent networks across modalities, across professions, and between professionals and their client groups, to develop new, richer discourses about what a healthy society could be like. As Elizabeth Cotton says: 'We all have to become citizens in mental health, not just clinicians if we are to survive.'<sup>1</sup> ■



**Richard Bagnall-Oakeley & Juliet Lyons**  
About the authors

Richard Bagnall-Oakeley is an integrative psychotherapist and supervisor who works mainly with children and young people. Following a long history of involvement in various grass-roots campaigns for social change and social justice, he was one of the founder members of the Psychotherapy and Counselling Union, which he now chairs. He lives and works in Tottenham, North London.

Juliet Lyons is an integrative child psychotherapist and secretary of the Psychotherapy and Counselling Union. She works in private practice in west and south-west London and has been a school counsellor for 12 years. She previously worked for Sure Start, in a nursery setting and with adults with severe learning disabilities.

## REFERENCES

1. Cotton E. The future of therapy. E-book. *Surviving Work*; 2017. <https://thefutureoftherapy.org/eBook>
2. Psychologists Against Austerity. The psychological impact of austerity: a briefing paper. [Online.] *Psychologists Against Austerity*; 2015. <https://psychagainstausterity.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/paa-briefing-paper.pdf> (accessed 14 October 2018).

