

# Responding to change

It takes resilience to manage the isolation, insecurity and inconsistency of private practice. **Liddy Carver** asks whether therapy trainings encourage students to consider the myriad challenges involved

**W**ith big hitters such as John McLeod<sup>1,2</sup> and Colin Feltham<sup>3,4</sup> involved in the debate about therapy training once more, nonchalant acceptance that our profession is going to the dogs no longer seems a viable option.

Counselling and psychotherapy are, however, a remarkably insular profession, with a number of vested interests, and nowhere is this more evident than in its training. Courses of every hue and colour are churning out students 10 to the dozen, like a sausage factory with no off button, without very much thought about what might happen thereafter. If you're one of the lucky ones (living in Wales and working with children), your career path may seem relatively rosy. If, however, you have the misfortune to live elsewhere, you are probably one among many who have waved goodbye to savings in the forlorn hope of a meaningful career at the end of it.

The market is saturated. There is no fairer way of saying it. Picking up piecemeal work or continuing to work 'voluntarily' years after your training has ended can be emotionally rewarding and add to the lifelong skills you gained as a student. However, I would hazard a guess there is more than a hint of envy when you congratulate one of your cohort on finally landing the 'perfect' job you secretly coveted.

exploiting the public for our own ends. There are several dangers in sending out these kinds of messages: it legitimises the practice of therapists working 'gratis' years after qualification, and it becomes a tool to manipulate a venerable tradition of working with despair and anguish.

So, as independent practitioners, where would we like our professional body to stand? Whether BACP, as a professional body with a voluntary register approved by the Professional Standards Authority for Health and Social Care, is ethically obliged to ensure that prospective practitioners are advised of the unlikelihood of work after training is open to question. Neatly sidestepping this issue, McQuaid<sup>5</sup> provocatively suggests that prospective students ask trainers a series of questions including, 'Do you have a clinical practice?'. Taking this in the spirit in which I hope it was intended, there is merit in also asking, 'How would you rate my chances of earning a decent living after I leave here?' and, 'What can you offer that will make me stand out from the crowd?'

Are other questions also pertinent? Does emphasis on the practice of individual counselling and psychotherapy, often in an

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## Unrealistic expectations

I'm frequently surprised by how trainings often gloss over the 'nuts and bolts' of establishing and sustaining a viable independent practice. McQuaid warns:<sup>5</sup> 'In reality, it is unwise to consider setting up a private practice unless you have at least a few years of clinical experience under your belt.' However, many students still have unrealistic expectations about what to expect from independent practice on qualifying, and have not been encouraged to consider the myriad challenges involved in 'going it alone'; not least of these is managing isolation, insecurity and inconsistency, which requires considerable resilience.

Banning<sup>6</sup> has already drawn our attention to the significant investment required to train as a counsellor and the slim chance of a career thereafter. The current level of counselling and psychotherapy students qualifying each year remains far higher than is warranted. There's a drastic need to reduce the number of students in order to enhance opportunities for the financial remuneration of existing practitioners. However, as Feltham notes, 'It is not in the interests of those who profit from the talking therapies to address it.'<sup>7</sup> I wonder about the disinclination of our profession to discuss whether the provision of a highly satisfying service and at a fair price really are mutually exclusive aspirations. It is as if talking about money makes us charlatans

independent practice setting, actually serve the public interest? What need might there be to recognise specialist skills and expertise beyond an individual counselling and psychotherapy setting? What professional standards and guidelines might be required (if any) when it comes to supply and demand of counsellors and psychotherapists? What responsibility do trainers have to teach students about the increasingly ethno-culturally diverse UK population, or about emerging areas of practice and new populations, such as dementia and disruptive behaviour disorders in children, as practitioners enter the marketplace?

## Specialisation in training

Such quandaries are clearly understood by a number of innovative training courses. The opportunity to capitalise on the groundswell of interest in counselling children and young people has not been lost at Metanoia, for example, where conversion courses cater for people wanting to acquaint themselves with a wider client base. Also at Metanoia, online counselling training is provided on the aptly named Postgraduate Certificate in Cyberculture for Therapeutic Purposes and, extending the net still further, we may be caught wide-eyed between the appeals of psychological coaching versus coaching psychology. Last, but by no means least, we are inveigled to part with our money and study online or in intensive blocks at the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling headed by Emmy van Deurzen. It would take a strong person not to be enticed by courses apparently tailor-made to a peripatetic professional lifestyle.

If, like a child in a sweetshop, you have had your appetite whetted and fancy undertaking research on new and emerging topics that might support you in your work, take a gander at the nice and shiny Psychotherapy and Counselling Psychology Reflections Research Centre (PCPR) at the privately run Regent's

University, with its links to the NHS and other organisations. Here existential/phenomenological, psychoanalytic, humanistic, integrative and cognitive behavioural concepts are combined to enable students to understand 'difference in conceptualisation, richness in epistemological traditions and philosophical principles, enabling the development of a more open, reflective thinking to philosophy, theory and practice'.<sup>8</sup>

My intention is not to frighten anyone into signing up for the next available (and inordinately expensive) conversion course, but I'm asking whether now is the time to reflect on how well we have been served by the training we received and what direction we might like it to take in future. Are we now at a point where a philosophy of generic core training should be replaced by a focus on specific populations?

Allow me this simple digression. I began my training looking for trainers well versed in what they were doing, who had an ability to work ethically and the courage to challenge my longstanding perceptions and expectations. While in danger of appearing a Luddite, I had absolutely no interest in their philosophical or theoretical persuasion, or their ability to create a profound spiritual meeting of hearts and minds. Actually, what I sought were individuals who had heaps of experience as practitioners at the coalface, with a particular penchant for working with trauma and a reassuringly no-nonsense approach to the practicalities of working with a student who, by her own definition, would probably be particularly distrustful and obstructionist most of the time.

## Recent initiatives

The current philosophy of education in counselling and psychotherapy, underpinned by the Quality Assurance Agency's subject benchmarks,<sup>9</sup> creatively allows programmes to train counsellors who first and foremost want to be practitioners, while emphasising the value for students (particularly at postgraduate level) to be trained in research skills. Presumably the purpose of this is to enable practitioners to know more about the way counselling and psychotherapy work, and how or why they may be effective (or, indeed, ineffective).

Given that the voice of the consumer is key, no great leap of imagination is required to predict that the rigid divisions separating therapy into competing approaches will continue to dissipate<sup>10</sup> as greater emphasis is given to the integration of broad evidence-based and practice-oriented research in the training environment. Initiatives such as the Counselling for Depression (CfD) model of psychological therapy for practitioners working in the IAPT programme, and the

Counselling MindEd project integrated with the CYP IAPT core curriculum are cases in point. The indirect impact on practitioners working in private practice has yet to be seen, and some may see these as created by privileged and narrowly focused professionals. However, interdisciplinary collaboration and the promotion of specialist skills and expertise have the potential to support all practitioners to equip themselves better for the groundswell of referrals in a rapidly changing wider environment.

## Changing responsibilities

Whether or not we came into counselling for ideological or political reasons, the reality is that a rigorous and philosophical standpoint on the position of counselling in contemporary society is now becoming an imperative. Training programmes arguably have an ethical responsibility to inform students about the opportunities available for practitioners within healthcare, schools and forensic settings, and the specific skill sets required to work in such environments. Meanwhile, the opportunity to specialise during initial training in areas such as trauma, domestic violence, safeguarding issues, sexual violence, assessment procedures and therapeutic interventions for families, groups and specific populations provides a faint chance for practitioners to compete with counselling psychologists on a reasonably level playing field, rather than face the spectre of extinction. There is little doubt that therapy training can profoundly affect students' personal lives and, by implication, shape the lives of our clients. However, pervasive preoccupation with 'self' may need to go hand in hand with specialist training in a profession perilously close to the brink.

Increasingly, campaigning is a key area of BACP's policy and public affairs agenda.<sup>11</sup> The intention to increase awareness of psychological therapies among politicians, civil servants and opinion formers, and respond to consultations from organisations and government bodies, presumably on our behalf, comes with an exhortation that members write to their MP to sign Early Day Motion 1063 and support increased investment in psychological therapies. In 2013 BACP also commissioned a report<sup>12</sup> by authors at the London School of Economics and Political Science to examine the economic case for counselling and psychotherapy.

Arguably, core training now needs to encompass areas such as restorative justice, alcohol dependence, self-harm and dementia, in line with BACP consultation responses to non-governmental organisations, and to serve future practitioners fairly. Rock's<sup>13</sup> perspective, '... let's not do this

from a starting point of a proposed *deficit*... if we are not to end up with yet another *competence model*', is germane. BACP's Professional Education and Development Forum (PEDF), established to 'facilitate collaborative, informed and constructive work on counsellor education',<sup>14</sup> publicly recognises that accredited training in higher education has been decimated and aims to align strands of training and education; its findings are anticipated later this year.

Factors such as immigration, societal oppression and injustice to minority groups, and the consequences in terms of mental health needs in an increasingly ethno-culturally diverse UK population, are pertinent. Models of therapy that emphasise working therapeutically with the 'inner life' of the client, while convincing, also need to account for the intersection of race/ethnicity, gender and sexual identities, religion and class, if counselling training is not to exist in a vacuum. Powerful views continue to be expressed about tokenism and the lack of an informed discussion during training regarding issues of race and cultural difference.<sup>15</sup> Similar reservations have been expressed about attention paid to the assessment of serious mental health difficulties and the potential for practitioners lacking training or experience in this area to place either themselves, their client or the community at risk.<sup>16</sup>

## A commitment to challenge?

While trainers may need to climb down from their ivory tower and enter into a genuine dialogue with the people they continue to train, an argument also exists for the silent majority of private practitioners to voice publicly what they may feel privately about the changing face of our profession. There is a danger for all of us in colluding in the maintaining of a safe environment, rather than collaboratively challenging our professional body to continue investigating the status quo.

Western theories that provide the basis for therapy time and again fail to account for issues that cannot be resolved simply through individual change – poverty, oppression, bullying and violence – and increasingly practitioners in independent practice are being asked to speak out and empower those they work with. Sometimes we find ourselves isolated and confused as our training fails to provide us with the necessary advocacy competencies to achieve this. With changing demographics, the focus we place on an ageing population may well require us to renegotiate our training to act as social change agents with some of the most vulnerable in society. How prepared are we to change our practice accordingly and what do we require of our training providers and, indeed, our professional body in order to rise to that challenge?

Adams perspicaciously explains, 'We are vulnerable on several fronts; it is not just our histories which may intrude on our clinical work but our current, day-to-day lives too with their endless array of possible difficulties and stresses.'<sup>17</sup> Why then complicate our lives still further by addressing some of the most problematic issues that afflict the system in which we all live and work? Well, because without a hefty amount of personal engagement in the face of radically changing circumstances, the future of counselling and psychotherapy is in danger of being decided from the top down. Perhaps the only solution is to seek a strategic *quid pro quo*. Failing that, we can continue to bury our heads in the sand and hope for the best as our professional landscape transforms in front of our eyes. ■

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## Your thoughts please

If you have any responses to the issues raised in this article, please write a letter or respond with an article of your own. Email: [privatepractice.editorial@bacp.co.uk](mailto:privatepractice.editorial@bacp.co.uk)

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