

Introduction

IN MY OWN EXPERIENCE AS A therapist, supervisor and trainer I have frequently been struck by the dangers of ignoring or minimizing social reality. The majority of the trainees, students, supervisees and colleagues I have encountered over the years have, like myself, come from backgrounds which would not necessarily expose them to the kinds of attitudes, prejudices and adverse discrimination which, unfortunately, still pervade our society. I have come across lamentable ignorance, which is excusable, and occasionally a blinkered unwillingness to challenge this ignorance, which is not. On this count, what I am hoping to provide in this book is some information that will remove the blinkers and fill in some of the gaps. The BACP *Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy* states that ‘the practitioner is responsible for learning about and taking account of the different protocols, conventions and customs that can pertain to different working contexts and cultures’ (BACP, 2002: 9), which is a considerable improvement on their previous code of ethics which merely mentioned ‘sensitivity to cultural context’. We do need more than sensitivity – we need understanding and we cannot understand without information and learning.

As counsellors and therapists, as well as increasing our knowledge about what goes on out there in society, we need to understand what is going on inside ourselves – what is

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commonly referred to in the trade as ‘self-awareness’. I have always understood this to mean owning up to all the nasty bits – not necessarily to anyone else, though under the right circumstances that can be very therapeutic – but primarily to one’s self. I believe we all hold views which have the potential to be discriminatory, prejudiced or exclusionary; I believe we all have difficulty, in some degree, with people who are in some significant way different from ourselves. On this count what I am hoping this text might do, for readers who may not have explored fully this part of their being, is to challenge them to do so. In the BACP *Ethical Framework* we find the statement, ‘Practitioners should not allow their professional relationships with clients to be prejudiced by any personal views they may hold about lifestyle, gender, age, disability, race, sexual orientation, beliefs or culture’ (BACP, 2002: 7). The implication of this is that practitioners may well hold views on such matters which *could* prejudice their professional relationships. What is missing (although perhaps implicit) in this statement is the recognition of the need for practitioners to be aware of what those views are. The previous BAC *Code of Ethics* did not pull any punches; it stated categorically that ‘counsellors have a responsibility to consider and address their own prejudices and stereotyping attitudes and behaviour’ (BAC, 1998: B.2.4). This is what I think we need more of – too many of us, therapists, counsellors, supervisors, trainers, do not sufficiently consider and address such attitudes and behaviour in ourselves.

In the course of my research for this book I conducted an informal survey of counselling services and training courses throughout the UK. It was by no means comprehensive, but served as a useful straw poll of some of the characteristics of those engaged in the enterprises of counselling and psychotherapy. In the questionnaire sent out I posed questions first about the gender and racial or ethnic origin of counsellors, clients, training staff and students. Most organizations who

returned the questionnaire were willing to supply this information. I also asked questions about the psychiatric history of the same group. This yielded less information. Part of the questionnaire was devoted to the content of training courses and the extent to which topics such as race, gender, sexual orientation and mental illness are covered, if at all. The information that I gleaned from this survey forms the basis for many of the assertions in the first chapter, and elsewhere in the book.

The first chapter consists of an overview of some of the themes that occur and recur in connection with all the subjects examined in this text: identity, our response to difference, the nature of prejudice, and the debates around nature and nurture as well as around sameness and equality. The chapters that follow are all devoted to a particular topic – an element of being which has the potential to attract adverse discrimination. Within these chapters I have begun with a historical overview of each particular subject, and then attempted to analyse the themes and theories that surround it. There follows an examination and discussion of the relationship between the topic and the psychotherapeutic enterprise. In Chapter 5, on mental illness, there is a further section devoted to some of the intersections between all the subjects covered in the book. My discussions centre principally on the western world – Europe, the USA and, in particular, the UK.

The scope of this book is necessarily limited. In order to do justice to the topics I wanted to cover, I had to restrict the number of topics that could be included. Apart from the four subjects I have examined – race and culture, gender, sexuality and mental illness – there are many others that are equally significant within the context of discrimination and difference. Disability, class, age and religion spring immediately to mind, and there are many more. I would like to emphasize that I have not excluded such topics on the grounds of seeing them as less worthy of study,

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but on the grounds of pragmatism and lack of space. I was faced with some invidious and difficult choices. There is much scope for further fruitful work in this field to examine other elements of experience where issues of difference and discrimination play a significant role.