

Difference and Discrimination in Psychotherapy and Counselling

Sue Marshall



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Difference and Discrimination in
Psychotherapy and Counselling

Sue Marshall



SAGE Publications
London • Thousand Oaks • New Delhi

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First published 2004

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SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B-42, Panchsheel Enclave
Post Box 4109
New Delhi 100 017

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN 1 4129 0117 0
ISBN 1 4129 0118 9 (pbk)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2003115331

Typeset by C&M Digital (P) Ltd., Chennai, India
Printed in India at Gopsons Papers Ltd, Noida

to Charles
who has always believed in me

to Harry
whose enthusiasm inspires me

and to Alice
who knows what it means to be different

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General Introduction to The SPC Series

IT IS BOTH A GREAT HONOUR and a pleasure to welcome readers to The SPC Series.

The School of Psychotherapy and Counselling at Regent's College (SPC) is one of the largest and most widely respected psychotherapy, counselling and counselling psychology training institutes in the UK. The SPC Series published by Sage marks a major development in the School's mission to initiate and develop novel perspectives centred upon the major topics of debate within the therapeutic professions so that their impact and influence upon the wider social community may be more adequately understood and assessed.

A brief overview of SPC

Although its origins lie in an innovative study programme developed by Antioch University, USA, in 1977, SPC has been in existence in its current form since 1990. SPC's MA in Psychotherapy and Counselling Programme obtained British validation with City University in 1991. More recently, the MA in Existential Counselling Psychology obtained accreditation from the British Psychological Society. SPC was also the first UK institute to develop a research-based MPhil/PhD Programme in Psychotherapy

and Counselling, and this has been validated by City University since 1992. Largely on the impetus of its first Dean, Emmy van Deurzen, SPC became a full training and accrediting member of the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) and continues to maintain a strong and active presence in that organization through its Professional Members, many of whom also hold professional affiliations with the British Psychological Society (BPS), the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), the Society for Existential Analysis (SEA) and the European Society for Communicative Psychotherapy (ESCP).

SPC's other programmes include: a Foundation Certificate in Psychotherapy and Counselling, Advanced Professional Diploma Programmes in Existential Psychotherapy and Integrative Psychotherapy, and a series of intensive Continuing Professional Development and related adjunct courses such as its innovative Legal and Family Mediation Programmes.

With the personal support of the President of Regent's College, Mrs Gillian Payne, SPC has recently established the Psychotherapy and Counselling Consultation Centre housed on the college campus which provides individual and group therapy for both private individuals and organizations.

As a unique centre for learning and professional training, SPC has consistently emphasized the comparative study of psychotherapeutic theories and techniques while paying careful and accurate attention to the philosophical assumptions underlying the theories being considered and the philosophical coherence of those theories to their practice-based standards and professional applications within a diversity of private and public settings. In particular, SPC fosters the development of faculty, and graduates who think independently are theoretically well informed and

able skilfully and ethically to apply the methods of psychotherapy and counselling in practice, in the belief that knowledge advances through criticism and debate, rather than uncritical adherence to received wisdom.

The integrative attitude of SPC

The underlying ethos upon which the whole of SPC's educational and training programme rests is its *integrative attitude*, which can be summarized as follows.

There exists a multitude of perspectives in current psychotherapeutic thought and practice, each of which expresses a particular philosophical viewpoint on an aspect of being human. No one single perspective or set of underlying values and assumptions is universally shared.

Given that a singular, or shared, view does not exist, SPC seeks to enable a learning environment which allows competing and diverse models to be considered both conceptually and experientially so that their areas of interface and divergence can be exposed, considered and clarified. This aim espouses the value of holding the tension between contrasting and often contradictory ideas, of 'playing with' their experiential possibilities and of allowing a paradoxical security which can 'live with' and at times even thrive in the absence of final and fixed truths.

SPC defines this aim as 'the integrative attitude' and has designed all of its courses so that its presence will challenge and stimulate all aspects of our students' and trainees' learning experience. SPC believes that this deliberate engagement with difference should be reflected in the manner in which the faculty relate to students, clients and colleagues at all levels. In such a way this attitude may be seen as the lived expression of the foundational ethos of SPC.

The SPC Series

The SPC Series seeks to provide readers with wide-ranging, accessible and pertinent texts intended to challenge, inspire and influence debate in a variety of issues and areas central to therapeutic enquiry. The Series reflects SPC's internationally acknowledged ability to address key topics from an informed, critical and non-doctrinal perspective.

The continuing expansion of texts within the SPC Series expresses what is hoped will be a long and fruitful relationship between SPC and Sage. More than that, there exists the hope that the series will become identified by professionals and public alike as an invaluable contribution to the advancement of psychotherapy and counselling as vigorously self-critical, socially minded and humane professions.

PROFESSOR ERNESTO SPINELLI
Series Editor

Acknowledgements

IF I WERE TO TRACE BACK THE thoughts, ideas, events and conversations that have culminated in the writing of this book, I would have to credit the original impetus of the project to the inspirational teaching of June Roberts, whose seminar on social issues I took one spring in the early 1990s. June died in 2000, sadly, but I would like to think that some of her passion, energy and her attitude of challenging orthodoxy live on in the pages that follow.

I have gained much in my professional career from the many students I have taught. Their input and ideas are also represented in this book – I am grateful both to them and for the richness of experience that teaching others always provides.

I would like to thank the many people who have helped me in a number of ways throughout the writing of this book. My first acknowledgement has to go to Ernesto Spinelli, whose encouragement and help inspired me to think about making a beginning. Many friends and colleagues have provided support along the way. In particular I would like to thank Sarah-Gay Fletcher, Marilyn Foster, Sue Kork, Michael Montier, Kelly Noel-Smith, Boo Orman, Beryl Semple and Frances Wilks – their friendship, professional input and belief in me have been invaluable. Very special thanks must go to Tato Bromley, whose tireless

work in helping with research and typing has made the whole project possible within the deadlines set.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their consistent and tireless interest, support and encouragement throughout this project.

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

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,

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.



Discrimination, Difference and Identity

EACH INDIVIDUAL PERSON IS unique. Our uniqueness defines us and separates us. It may also be the source of our delight in each other and enrich our personal relationships. Over and above our uniqueness we also share characteristics with other people – some characteristics with almost everybody else, others with only a few. Common features, like unique qualities, can also form the basis of connections and relationships between people and groups. So, in varying degrees, we are like and unlike other people we encounter. Despite the fact that most people are able to tolerate, even celebrate and enjoy, the unique differences of others with whom they come into contact, in general we are most comfortable in the company of those with whom we share common features. Such features may be social class, educational background, taste in music, religious beliefs, professional interests and a whole host of other possible factors. The more we have ‘in common’ with another person, the more likely we are to feel an affinity with them. Differences, too, may be a source of interest, but they are potentially more challenging and divisive. There is a level of comfort in being able to identify with elements of another person’s being or experience.

History and observation demonstrate that our response to differentness is not universally one of acceptance. Neither is

it universally one of condemnation and rejection. I would maintain, however, that it is more often a response which veers away from inclusion and tends towards withdrawal. Such withdrawal can take many forms – some relatively benign, others with a greater capacity for causing offence or damage. Prejudice and adverse discrimination exist in all social groups. The fact that there are laws against discrimination of various kinds in every western country attests to its existence. You do not need to outlaw something unless it has proved to be problematic. Such laws have helped by punishing offenders – people who have been shown to be actively practising racism or sexism or some other form of discrimination – and, presumably, by acting as deterrents. The deterrent effect would be to discourage people from engaging in overt expressions of prejudices, but would do nothing to remove the underlying beliefs, thoughts and feelings which motivate such expressions. It would be convenient to assume that the phenomena of prejudice and adverse discrimination manifest themselves in a small and reprehensible group within society and that most of us are in the clear – unbiased and prejudice-free. I do not believe this to be the case. Fortunately, it is only a small minority who choose to engage in the most extreme forms of discriminatory behaviour – violence or even murder on the basis of a person's skin colour, religion or sexual orientation. But that does not exonerate the rest of us from harbouring prejudices. We all have preferences and we discriminate, in the sense of making choices based on our values and tastes, in all areas of our lives. Many of these choices and preferences are in response to the perceived similarities and differences of others. And it is in these responses, I believe, that the potential for prejudice is present in all of us.

The presence of our own prejudices or biases is something we prefer not to acknowledge or examine, precisely because it conflicts with that aspect of our chosen identity by which we would like to see ourselves as non-judgemental,

fair-minded, accepting of all humankind. How, then, do we address it? Only by scrupulously honest and searching self-examination. This can be achieved on our own, in dialogue with others, maybe in therapy or with close friends. But, like all dimensions of self-discovery, it cannot be forced upon us by others. You can take a horse to water, or a client to therapy, but ... as the saying goes. I suspect that many students of counselling or psychotherapy sit through their mandatory hours of therapy while in training without really looking too closely at some of those parts of their inner life that they are least happy about. In writing this book I am hoping, possibly vainly, to provoke in the reader the impulse to look within and own some of those uncomfortable, possibly deeply hidden, prejudices and dislikes.

There are many facts and much information within these pages. This is intentional. By remaining ignorant it is easier to hold on to the belief that we live in a just and equitable society. Once we have learnt that things are not quite how we would like them to be, it becomes harder to deceive ourselves and also, I hope, harder to maintain the pretence that we are not part of the system. Society is made of people – you and me and him and her. If the society we have created is imperfect, unjust, pernicious or oppressive it is because we have made it so, or allowed it to be so made.

In any interview process for counselling training courses, one of the things that causes me the greatest disquiet is an attitude of ‘them’ and ‘us’; the candidate who feels that he/she would like to ‘help’ those poor afflicted souls who are troubled and need some ‘direction’ in their lives. I believe you are only of any benefit as a counsellor or therapist if you see clients’ issues in terms of being part of the human predicaments and problems which affect us all, yourself included. By the same token, the person who retreats behind the clichés of ‘Some of my best friends are black/gay’ or ‘I don’t have a problem with the disabled/lesbians’ is taking the ‘them’ and ‘us’ stance, as well as laying claim

to a position of total impartiality which I suspect conceals an unwillingness to own the inner prejudices we all possess. I am not trying to suggest that there is not a distinction between overt racist violence and the moral position of most members of society. It is, however, too easy to disown our own prejudices by focusing on the more extreme manifestations of adverse discrimination. We are, by definition, part of society and the inequalities within its structure and institutions are but a reflection of the biases and values of each individual member of which society is constituted.

One of the recurring themes in this book is identity. Our individual identity is made up of a vast number of components which intersect with and interact upon one another; there is an artificiality about attempting to tease them apart, to isolate them and analyse them separately. And yet that is what I have attempted to do in order to examine the nature of the responses that are evoked by individual elements of differentness. It is important to bear in mind that each person is many other things as well as that element of his/her identity that has the potential to provoke a response of prejudice or discrimination. This has been highlighted by the lobby who urge use of the term 'gay men' instead of the term 'gays'. Using the word 'gay' as a noun implies the identification of a group of people by their sexual preference, as though that and that alone defined them as people. Society, however, still regularly refers to 'gays', 'lesbians', 'the disabled', 'the mentally ill' – a tendency which fosters the false assumption of homogeneity in such groups as well as having the effect of defining people by a single element of who they are. Both of these processes – the assumption of homogeneity and the defining of people by one aspect of their being – are central to the process of adverse discrimination.

The subjects I have chosen to examine are all ones which attract the highest levels of social interest and concern – and of discrimination and prejudice. For those of us, like myself,