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## **Counselling Psychologists working in Human Rights & Social Justice**

**Professor Rachel Tribe & Professor Divine Charura**

### **Abstract**

We argue in this paper that counselling psychologists have been championing human rights and social justice in different ways and since the Division was first being considered. We draw on counselling psychology historical literature, and from responses from our colleagues within the profession. As part of our preparation for this paper we put out a call to counselling psychologists through the Division of Counselling Psychology to invite our colleagues to share with us the work they are engaged in relating to Human Rights and Social Justice. In this paper we share themes from the responses we received on the various areas covering human rights aspects of counselling psychology and social justice, for example championing climate justice, equality, diversity, and inclusion. Our call was operationalised through a **Questback link** survey which comprised of 10 questions. These included demographic questions, questions which enquired about areas of respondent's work which covered human rights aspects of psychology and social justice. The responses for example included mental health work with refugees, asylum seekers, trafficked people, torture survivors; Black and Minoritised Ethnic adults aged 18+; people from what one responded noted as "the profoundly deaf community" who use BSL (British Sign Language) as their first language; and other aspects of equality, diversity, and inclusion. Furthermore, we enquired whether our counselling psychology respondents had faced experiences in which they have wanted to engage with human rights-based/ focused work but had been prevented from doing this. These questions could be responded to through qualitative responses, and we offer example of quotes from respondents throughout different sections of this paper. The respondents also replied at a specific time period and the issues raised might differ if the questionnaire was answered at an earlier or later time period.

## **Socio-political-cultural contexts**

Over the last few years nationally and internationally there have been numerous significant socio-political events which have illuminated even more, the need for human rights and social justice practice. These events have starkly shown how inequalities and intersectional issues have meant that certain groups have been affected more negatively, frequently adding to inequalities already experienced by structural inequities and geopolitical factors. For example, in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic, people from many Minoritised ethnic and migrant groups, as well as those living in relative poverty were more adversely affected (Greenaway et al, 2020). The cost-of-living crisis has also led to more difficulties for people already struggling with issues of poverty (Ballo et al, 2023). Furthermore, the climate crisis has also had and will have a disproportionate effect on groups and individuals with less financial resources or social capital both individually or nationally (Wainwright, 2023). These factors, combined with the discrimination and stigma frequently experienced by people living with psychological distress shows the importance of human rights being foregrounded within mental health.

## **A note on language and principles informing counselling psychologists.**

We would like to acknowledge that language evolves quickly and thus in the chosen terminology in this paper, the aim is to convey and to use language sensitively, and appropriately, in line with human rights and social justice principles to avoid repetition of othering, injustice and violating the rights or choices of others. We want however to foreground the importance of acknowledging the impact of language and why counselling psychology encourages ways of seeing human beings in their diversity through a respectful, humanising, and valuing way. Furthermore, counselling psychologists are trained to try to value and promote anti-discriminatory practice and are informed by principles which guide socio-political action within and beyond the therapy room. This includes for example engaging with clients about the impact of being othered, social injustice, human rights violations, and a progressive vision for socio-political change (Cooper, 2023; Tribe & Bell, 2018; Winter, & Charura, 2023).

## **Counselling psychology roots in human rights and social justice**

The term 'human rights' refers to a wide range of individual, political, social rights recognized by international law. It is universal and inherent to us all, regardless of nationality, sex, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, language, or any other status, and range from the most fundamental ones such as the right to life, and others like the rights to food, education, work, health and liberty (Luci, 2023).

Social justice and a focus on human rights has been considered a core feature of the roots, fibre and branches of counselling psychology. Nevertheless, the specific terms 'social justice' and 'human rights' have not always been used in every counselling psychology context as they are extremely broad in scope and cover a multitude of concepts (Winter, & Charura, 2023). We concur with those who have suggested that social justice as 'an umbrella term' for concepts, such as diversity, change, equity, inequality, oppression, marginalization, disruption, and affirmative action' (Peters & Luke, 2021, p. 9). Other perspectives note that the concept of 'Social Justice' is constituted by the concepts of 'social' which relates to collective or group cohesion, and in this context the action that is needed to address the social problems or social cohesion issues. The 'justice' aspect thus being concerned with equity and the achievement of equitable outcomes (Schenker et al., 2019). In considering social justice, it has been argued that what must be considered are social constructs such as gender, class, sexuality, social class and economic factors, age, dis/ability, ethnicity neurodiversity (Moodley, 2009; Winter & Charura, 2023). Thus, in this way justice can be expressed through the notions of fairness and equal opportunity, as well as equitable outcomes.

Following then from this, the history of counselling psychology and its roots are steeped in human rights, social justice work and draw from humanistic and existential values. We concur here with Gupta (2022) who conceptualised an existential rights paradigm for anti-oppressive practice which is centred on truth, freedom, love, hope, and exploration of power discourses (Cosgrove & Shaughnessy, 2020; Gupta 2022).

The humanistic-existential roots and their focus on the right to truth relates to the importance of valuing individual and community subjective realities, 'their own truths' and thereby challenging cultures of silence that suppress truth-telling about historical and present-day injustice (Gupta, 2022). Counselling psychology thus values the

telling of counter-narratives and engaging voices of those with the 'lived experience' of being marginalised by others or by the dominant culture/s. A human rights truth-based approach includes allyship in resisting the narratives, which reinforce systems of oppression as well as highlighting the microaggressions that perpetuate social injustice within individuals' socio-political environments (Charura & Clyburn, 2023). The UN conceptualizes the "right to truth" at both an individual and collective community perspective, arguing that public truth-telling about human rights violations can prevent societies from a repetition of social injustices in the future (Antkowiak, 2002; Gupta 2022; United Nations, 2008a, 2008b).

We therefore acknowledge that a human rights-based approach to mental health aligns with liberation psychology which illuminates how socio-political oppression can inflict "psychosocial trauma" among individuals and entire societies (Martín-Baró & Aron, 1994). Therefore, counselling psychology's positioning by its very nature in relation to human rights and power is clinically, socially, and socio-politically radical and critical. Within counselling psychology literature there is a literature that exemplifies the work of counselling psychologists from a human rights perspective and how they are upholding these values of truth, freedom, love, hope, and exploration of power discourses. These examples span social advocacy efforts outside of therapy, such as research, pedagogy and activism. Such social justice work includes working with groups that have experienced discrimination, (i.e. sanctuary seekers), poverty, exclusion, isolation, unemployment, (Moodley, 2009; Winter, 2019); health equity and Mental Health, challenges within health services (Patel et al., 2018; Bhugra et al., 2022; Hammad & Tribe, 2020; Persaud et al, 2023). Some of this work was conducted in partnership with other mental health professionals.

For counselling psychologists, the implications for thinking about psychological distress across cultures and communities can be aligned with Moodley's (2009) conceptualization of minoritized groups being "outside the sentence". Such groups for example include black and other visible minority, deaf clients, and those whose human rights are impacted because of their Gender Sexuality, Erotic and Relationship Diversity (GSERD). We concur then following from Moodley (2009) that being located "outside" the masculine cultural metaphors and conventional

theoretical epistemologies of dominant societal discourses produces the effect of being "inside" another process. That is one which includes for example the history of disempowerment subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement, and human rights abuses (Moodley, 2009). Whilst, in contrast to this, Charura & Paul, (2015) have written about the powerful dynamics experienced through compassion, positive regard of the humanity of the individual/group or community, empathy, warmth, and acceptance of other/s.

The UN states that all human rights are interdependent, and thus the right to mental health is bound up with other human rights, and hence violations upon other human rights undoubtedly have an impact on the right to health (United Nations, 2008a, 2008b). Our work as practitioners, and that of the colleagues who responded to our survey stands against coercive treatment in psychiatric services and implores consideration of critical social determinants and geo-political factors that impact people's psychological health. This includes disempowerment of minoritized groups, all forms of violence, discrimination, poverty, exclusion, isolation, lack of access to housing in society. This is in line with the UN, (1991) Principles for the protection of persons with mental illness and the improvement of mental health as it fosters an environment that respects and protects basic civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights [as] fundamental to mental health" for citizens (United Nations, 1991).

### **What principles of human rights-based approaches or theories inform counselling psychologists clinical practice?**

In this section we now share some perspectives from some of the respondents of our survey to exemplify the principles of human rights-based approaches or theories informing counselling psychologists clinical practice?

*"Being trauma informed, what happened to you rather than what's wrong with you, taking a growth/strengths orientated stance, explicitly working to change social context such as housing and welfare issues, supporting clients to access legal support, community integration such as ESOL classes, rejecting a neutral therapeutic stance and explicitly denouncing acts of torture"*

*“I am committed to non-discriminatory and equal practice, ... I aim to work in collaboration with clients to ensure that they are active participators in their care and are empowered to share their wishes and dislikes in therapeutic practice without maintaining the role of 'expert' and acting as though I know what is in their best interest”.*

*“International human rights law and the Power-threat-meaning framework”*

*“Working in a culturally competent way, not fitting the client into a white western lens but rather making effort to understand their perspectives and values. Not expecting clients to educate me on their race, religion, ethnic groups etc. - doing my own research”.*

*“Given we have the new BSL Act 2022, I feel that hearing professionals need to re-assess their audiological biases, their clinical environments, and clinical practices as potential Deaf allies.” #BSLAlly*

*“...I hope to challenge current thinking of Deafness as a 'disability', to Deafhood as a distinct Cultural and Linguistic Minority.”*

**Themes of counselling psychologists work that address human rights issues within their own settings.**

Drawing from responses we received in the survey we have noted below some themes relating to human rights issues within their own practice settings. These include:

**Table 1.**

| <b>Role</b> | <b>Groups/clients/patients that counselling</b> | <b>Areas of the work covers human rights aspects of psychology and social justice,</b> |
|-------------|---|--|
|-------------|---|--|

|   | <b>psychologists are working with:</b>   |  |
|---|--|--|
| Trainee counselling psychologists   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asylum seekers and refugees.</li> <li>• Older adults, neurodivergent adults across the lifespan.</li> <li>• Trafficked people</li> <li>• Torture survivors</li> <li>• Any and all Black and Minoritised Ethnic adults aged 18+.</li> <li>• The Profoundly Deaf community who use BSL (British Sign Language) as their first language</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equality, diversity, inclusion, in relation to Mental health, welfare and legal issues. signposting to different services.</li> <li>• Community mental healthcare.</li> <li>• Neurodivergence.</li> <li>• Human rights.</li> <li>• The Profoundly Deaf experience of accessing culturally affirmative therapy.</li> </ul> |
| Practitioner psychologists with experience going up to 18 years in practice | Gender, sexuality, and relationship diverse people; victim/survivors of childhood sexual abuse and gender  | In an academic setting currently - teaching with a mixture of explicit and implicit focus on human rights issues such as: anti discriminatory anti-oppressive practice for practitioner  |



|  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
|  | <p>based violence; people with complex difficulties and multiple instabilities; within psychology and the mental health system.</p> <p>Offenders at high risk of reoffending.</p> <p>- advocacy for people who have experienced multiple exclusions from health services, social care services, housing, education work and leisure, for example.</p> | <p>psychologists; in general, empowerment, protection from human rights harms and ethical practice; advocacy; critical analysis of power and dominant discourses when working with marginalised groups;</p> <p>- research and research supervision with a focus on social justice issues, psychology of women and girls, LGBTQIA+ psychology i.e., stigmatised and excluded groups.</p> <p>- supervision tutorials/personal development work/academic tutoring relationships with students that embrace difference and diversity, multiple ways of knowing, being, personal and professional growth i.e. inclusive, ethical, protective from psychological harm within an academic institution;</p> <p>In independent practice currently</p> <p>- intentionally and explicitly 'marketing' myself as a psychologist who is queer (lesbian) and works with queer people, groups and communities i.e. making psychological</p> |
|--|---|--|

|  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
|  |  | <p>therapies available to excluded groups and improving mental health and wellbeing, empowerment, advocacy.</p> <p>In the past, working in Her Majesty's Prison Service and Young Offenders Institution as a Counselling Psychologist<br/>- advocating and working to improve the psychological health and wellbeing of women within the prison service, many of whom were experiencing psychological distress and/or at risk of harming themselves, and who were often victim/survivors of gender-based violence, abuse, coercion and/or been excluded from support.</p> <p>In the past, working in a personality disorder service as a Counselling Psychologist</p> <p>In wider society more generally, representing psychology and counselling psychology (for example responding to Government Consultation on banning conversion therapy, talking at my kids school 'world of work' day) in a way that upholds human rights principles in relation</p> |
|--|--|---|

|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
|  |  | to equality (and equity), non-discrimination, psychological health, respect and so on. |
|--|--|--|

Some respondents expanded further on reflections of which areas of their work which covers human rights aspects of psychology and social justice: for example, some spoke to the importance of:

*“The case conceptualisation of working ethically with older adults and neurodivergent adults, both of which are likely to face numerous barriers to accessing appropriate and just healthcare and treatment. A holistic approach is needed with both populations to ensure that a full spectrum of factors across their everyday lives are taken into consideration as part of appropriate healthcare, such as co-occurring health issues and intersectionality”.*

*“Our service is trauma-focused and uses a relational model to address individuals' interpersonal problems and related offending. We aim to support individuals to develop a prosocial identity to reduce their risk of violent or sexually violent recidivism.”*

**How does the ethos of Counselling Psychology relate to social justice and human rights work?**

*“Totally relates - important to constantly be a reflective practitioner and attend to my own assumptions and biases. Using evidence-based practice to work within approved treatment protocols whilst also taking a relational approach to individualize to each client. Explicitly working within a social justice approach - sometimes it feels like we pay lip service to this without actually doing it”*

*“I strongly believe in the values of social justice, and promoting the values of fairness, equality, and inclusion for everyone that I work with. These values underpin every encounter I have with clients, and I keep these values in mind whenever I am thinking about my work as a trainee counselling psychologist.*

*“It is all tied up together and unseparable-utable! It is absolutely central. I chose Counselling Psychology as my postgraduate, applied psychology training because of the explicit stance taken towards psychology, which you could argue is a human rights stance. For me, there is no other way to do or be as a psychologist”.*

*“I think that human rights frameworks should be included in counselling psychology training, as should equality issues be more meaningfully addressed (rather than seen as ticking boxes) by training institutions”.*

*“Social justice is a core principle of CoP - amplifying voices of people who are not given a platform is crucial. Working with these clients highlights systemic issues in the UK which continue the oppression of various groups”.*

### **Challenges and barriers to engaging in social justice and human rights work in different contexts**

We have reflected on the potency of counselling psychology in championing social justice and human rights. We additionally asked our colleagues through the survey questions we sent out, what challenges they experienced, whether they had experiences when they wanted to engage with human rights-based/ focused work but had been prevented and what barriers they had experienced in undertaking this work? We share here some of the responses which we received, focusing on the issues raised by different groups.

#### **Trainee Counselling Psychologists**

*“I have wanted to take a more holistic approach to certain clients' care and treatment, but I have been prevented from doing this by service availability*

*and the challenges to accessing different areas of mental health support, which has surprised me on placement so far. One example of this is an elderly client that I think may be autistic; as there is no autism service attached to my placement, no further investigation is being done about this at present”.*

*“Another facet to this is the way trainee counselling psychologists are treated during placement. We are expected to work unpaid and without expenses paid, while finding enough money to earn a living and also having the time to have a life, study and work all at once. From a social justice/human rights perspective, I find this gap in acknowledgement from the NHS and placement settings as a whole rather demoralising”.*

### *Qualified Counselling Psychologists*

*“I would like to encourage the positive attributes of the profession to be shared throughout society, especially in the media. I have been concerned about the multiple course closures that have impacted the profession, and the lack of financial recompense during training is an additional challenge to upholding the social justice ethos of counselling psychology on a personal level. I hope that the profession would be more widely acknowledged if more people knew about us and what we can offer. “*

*“Yes, in an independent practice setting (a large organisation made up of self-employed, independent practitioners (psychologists, CBT therapists, counsellors) with an organisational, hierarchical structure) I was prevented from explicitly promoting (advertising) myself as a queer practitioner, from making use of visible markers of accessibility for the queer community i.e. rainbow progress flags, and from responding to a Government Consultation on banning conversion therapy as an organisation, which I offered to lead. I responded to the consultation as an individual psychologist, and asked others to do the same, and I left the organisation and set up my own independent practice”.*

*“Therapeutic goals focused on improving individuals' wellbeing can at times come into conflict with the security and discipline focus within the prison”.*

## **Implications of a social justice and human rights approach for counselling psychologists**

A social justice and human rights approach in counselling psychology aligns with at least three primary implications which include the commitment of counselling psychologists who practice clinically to become adept at treating and responding to the impact of geo-socio-political oppression and structural violence on clients'/patients' mental health or the psychological wellbeing of groups/communities we work with and responding to injustice as it presents in the consultation room or community contexts (Gupta, 2022; Velez, 2016; Bailey, 2023). This for example, includes when making therapeutic assessments and formulations. Secondly, it calls for counselling psychologists to engage in social advocacy efforts outside of therapy, such as research, pedagogy and political activism thereby contributing to change through allyship with oppressed groups. Thirdly it requires counselling psychologists to be self-reflexive about our positionality, ethics, and our use of power, ensuring our work respects the basic dignity and rights of all human beings (Moodley, 2009; Schmid, 2019; Velez, 2016; Winter, & Charura, 2023).

## **Conclusions**

This paper has focused on how human rights and social justice have been integrated into the underlying philosophy and essence of counselling psychology. The paper reports on a survey we initiated through the Division of Counselling Psychology open to all Division members to answer a series of 10 questions relating to human rights within counselling psychology. Their responses are summarised here, as are the challenges and barriers the respondents experienced attempting to undertake this work. The paper provides a range of examples which show the importance of human rights forming a central component of Counselling Psychology and within all areas of psychology and mental health. The work that counselling psychologists are

engaged is steeped in values and a commitment to freedom and liberation, love, facilitating hope, and power with rather than power over dynamics. This all integrates with our Counselling Psychology values and the ethical principles to guide our therapeutic work, research, and pedagogy. We would also welcome the opportunity to work with people from other areas of specialism in working towards improving human rights and issues of social justice across our profession and more widely.

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