To BPS or not to BPS – Is that the question for counselling psychology?

Terry Hanley

Sir Alex Ferguson, the manager of Manchester United football club (for those who that name is meaningless), once described their local rivals Manchester City as ‘Noisy Neighbours’. This rather derogative phrase came at a time when the local rivals were bought by one of the richest people in the world and began spending millions of pounds on developing themselves as a team. It therefore reflected the heightened interest in the club and their developing voice in the world of football. I can hear some of you asking where am I going with this, surely this isn’t something to do with counselling psychology? As a Manchester United fan, it is also somewhat galling to consider counselling psychology in the role of Manchester City, but I do see some parallels, and it is these that I focus upon below. Importantly, for a research publication, these parallels have an important resonance to the growing voice of counselling psychology research.

‘Don’t forget counselling psychology’
A recent letter by Barbara Douglas (the Chair of the Division of Counselling Psychology at the time of writing) to The Psychologist flagged up the omission of the Division’s Twitter feed in a recent article (Douglas, 2011, p.476). This was headlined with the statement ‘Don’t forget counselling psychology’. The phrase seemed incredibly apt given a number of recent occurrences stemming from the broader British Psychological Society (BPS). I am sure there are other instances, but I would flag up a few recent events as a point of reference.

Chartered Status
When I completed the Society’s Qualification of Counselling Psychology I breathed a huge sigh of relief. This enabled me to apply for Chartered status with the Society for which I viewed as a landmark in my professional development. On becoming chartered I was, therefore, quite gleeful to receive confirmation of this fact when the certificate eventually arrived. I was, however, a little puzzled by the booklet that accompanied it. This talked of the joys of becoming a Chartered member of the Society and presented illustrative cases of people who were living in this new wondrous club that I had just joined. Strangely there was no mention of counselling psychology and no illustrative case to provide me with inspiration (BPS, 2008).

The Research Excellence Framework (REF)
As a representative of the Division of Counselling Psychology on the Society’s Research Board I took part in putting forward the names of psychologists who might sit on this esteemed panel. For those of you who might not be familiar with the REF, it is a means of assessing the quality of research within higher education. Ultimately grading based upon the REF will impact upon training establishments throughout the country. Although the request was to put forward a group of psychologists representative of the profession, no counselling psychologists were included in this list. Ultimately it looks as if applied psychology itself may have been a little hard done to, but that’s an editorial for a different publication.
Applied psychology?
While we’re discussing applied psychology, have you seen the new text the Society have backed regarding applied psychology? This is one of the flagship publications under the auspices of the union of Wiley-Blackwell and the Society. On its back cover this presently purports to introduce the reader to the ‘six main areas of applied psychology’ (Davey, 2011). Now excuse my naivety, but as the third largest Division of in the Society (I will return to annual statistics later) surely counselling psychology has a presence, doesn’t it? Well, on flicking through the pages, I’m sure you will not be relieved to know that page 6 of the 692-page tome is almost completely devoted to the profession. Personally, I was amazed by such an omission of more substantive content.

The jobs market
It is not new that counselling psychologists struggle to compete in the application for applied psychology positions. Although there are signs of change, this still appears to be the case and, despite publicity being disseminated by the Society that applied psychology positions should be advertised based upon competence rather than title alone (e.g. Kinderman & Vassolas, 2010), there are still organisations advertising for positions in inappropriate ways (see, for instance, recent editions of The Psychologist). This is not my particular irritation at the moment, so I will move on quickly.

The British Journal of Counselling Psychology
Finally, I return to the issue of research. As some of you will know I, along with an incredibly supportive potential Editorial Board, have been pushing for the development of a British Journal of Counselling Psychology. This had been rejected by the, as was, Journals Committee, in a previous format (see Hanley, 2010, for a more detailed explanation of its rejection). At the beginning of the year I therefore submitted a second bite of the cherry and have recently received further confirmation that the Society will not be creating the publication. Although the response identified four potential weaknesses, it effectively came down to one un-rectifiable reason. This proved to be the perceived ‘double bind’ that a strong counselling psychology publication might lessen the value of the existing publications, particularly Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory Research and Practice. For me, such a decision is based upon the false premise that counselling psychologists see this as an outlet for their research, however, challenging the decision does not seem to be an option, with the end of the letter noting, ‘I wish you the best of luck if you choose to take the proposal elsewhere’.

To BPS or not to BPS – Is that the question?
So is the question noted above, and implicit in the statement above the question that the profession of counselling psychology faces? Is there really a place in the Society for those who find themselves aligned to a professional title that is so easily ignored or purposefully sidelined? Let’s be realistic, counselling psychology doesn’t really belong in the Society does it? I am sure that there are many who would agree with such a sentiment, but what does the data suggest? For those avid readers of the Society’s annual report, such as me, you will have noticed that the largest growing Division in the Society in 2010 was counselling psychology (BPS, 2011), an increase that keeps us as third largest at 2892 members. In a time of austerity such as the one we are in this seems quite an achievement. In contrast, it is noteworthy that the Division of Clinical Psychology took its first dip of just over 200 members during this period and the Psychotherapy section, which it could be argued the Society represents with a journal, now has 477 members. Now whatever the reason for the continued growth in counselling psychology and the decline of other areas, I find the trend quite curious given our omission from, for want of a better term, important stuff.

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In remaining balanced, I do not wish to be naïve. Of course, counselling psychology is not the panacea for the Society. We are but a small proportion of an overall membership and we encounter our own challenges which may be part of the problem. For instance, as with the other Divisions of applied psychology, we have our own identity crisis bubbling under the surface (e.g. Moller, 2011) and issues that provide status and power within the Society, such as research output, have not been the priority of a majority of the membership. But let’s not forget what the Society is either and the context in which it finds itself. It is, in my eyes, a body that is reeling somewhat from the big showdown with the Health Professions Council. Following on from it, it now returns to solely being a learned Society which can add value to ‘...all areas of psychological research and practice’ (BPS, 2011, no page). Once again, in my opinion, this vision has such great potential to harness and facilitate improvement in what we do as applied psychologists, a factor that should ultimately improve what we can offer to our clients and society. It is, therefore, incredibly important for the voice of counselling psychologists to be present when making decisions about the future of the discipline. The challenge, however, seems to be that, if we view the above list of omissions kindly, this all encompassing entity seems to be slightly absent minded at times. If we were to view it less kindly we may begin to feel that the broader Society viewed us a bit like those in the Harry Potter stories viewed Lord Voldemort – a name that must not be spoken – however, a paranoid stance may not be healthy in the long run.

**Increasing the volume**

In considering the bit part that Manchester City have in this Editorial, it is notable that they were successful in winning their first major trophy in 35 years this year. The noisiness of the club’s recent development has begun to come to fruition. Likewise, it is notable that counselling psychology has been increasing its volume over recent months and there have been successes. For instance, in turn:

- Counselling psychology now has a mention in an amended version of the chartered status booklet;
- The publishers of the *Applied Psychology* text have admitted it is regrettable that counselling psychology was not included. They are amending the statement on the back of the text and planning on including chapters on counselling psychology in the next reprint (as long as people can produce them fast enough); and,
- Those refusing to interview counselling psychologists for jobs because they have the incorrect job title have been successfully challenged.

So, although it is unfortunate that counselling psychology has been ignored, things have begun to move and much of this movement has come due to the time and dedication of members of the Division of Counselling Psychology. To my regret, we still, however, have a long way to go before we are taken serious in the world of psychology research in the UK. Realistically we will have limited impact within the REF and a journal that represents the work that we do will have to be created outside the Society. This is something we have to reflect upon and respond to mindfully. At this stage, I apologise for my rant. I also hope that my thoughts encourage you to shout a little louder than usual (send an email, challenge a decision, point out a failing, etc.). I should, however, return to the task at hand.

**Overview of this Edition**

In the papers which follow there are three genres of contributions. The first are a selection of four Research papers, the second a selection of three Theoretical papers, and finally a new section entitled Dialogues and Debates. Within this latter section, Laura Cutts provides a thoughtful review of Martin Milton’s recent edited text *Therapy and Beyond: Counselling psychology contributions to therapeutic and social issues* and a response to...
Moller’s paper entitled ‘The identity of counselling psychology in Britain is parochial, rigid and irrelevant but diversity offers a solution’ (Moller, 2011) is presented by Martin Milton. Below I will briefly introduce the two former sections.

The first Research paper, offered by Ward, Hogan and Menns, tackles a subject that will have some resonance to all of us. This is the issue of counselling psychology training. More specifically it explores the way a small sample of trainees, programme directors and experienced counselling psychologists make sense of therapeutic integration. It outlines some of the challenges faced by these groups and suggests how psychology may act as a harnessing feature. The second paper then examines the therapist’s use of self in therapy. Omylinska and James provide a thought-provoking reflection on how person-centred therapists make use of congruence within therapy.

The third and fourth Research papers reflect systematically upon two innovative therapeutic interventions. Initially, Allie and Whittall introduce and evaluate the Narrative project in which a systematic process of creating client narratives was engaged in with clients on an acute psychiatric ward. The findings outline some of the potential for this approach and the challenges that might be encountered. The last Research paper by Proudlock and Wellman then reflects upon the use of solution focused group work within adult mental health services. Once again this displays the potential for a relatively underused method of therapy.

Within the Theoretical section of this edition we begin with two papers that link to the first piece of research presented in this edition. These both reflect upon ways in which integration can be conceptualised. The first of these, by Richards, presents an overview of how ruptures may manifest within therapeutic alliances. This outlines numerous ways in which such difficulties may occur and considers how therapists may overcome such challenges. Secondly, Shorrock then considers how useful the Skilled Helper model may be for counselling psychologists making sense of integration in their therapeutic work. Finally, taking a more specific tack, Morton argues that Interpersonal Psychotherapy may be a helpful model for meeting the psychosocial cost of life gifted by medical intervention.

Each of the papers referred to above offers something very different and I hope that you enjoy, and hopefully find useful, some of the fruits of the different authors’ labours.

Welcome
The final part of this Editorial is a brief welcome to some new Editorial Board members. During the process of pulling together the potential Board for The British Journal of Counselling Psychology, the cause has received some significant support from colleagues. As a thank you for this, those individuals involved who were not already involved in Counselling Psychology Review have been offered, and accepted, a position on the Counselling Psychology Review Editorial Board. These are now listed in the inside cover of the publication and it is great to have them aboard.

About the Editor
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Dear Colleagues.

NHS Psychology Posts

Recent years have seen great changes in the profile and status of psychology in health and social care. The Health Professions Council (HPC) now recognises seven specific branches of practitioner psychologist (clinical, counselling, educational, forensic, health, occupational, and sport and exercise), who provide psychological services and consultation in the NHS. Each has particular competencies to contribute to health care as well as a set of shared psychological knowledge and skills. All practitioner psychologists must be registered with the HPC, which provides detailed information on the competencies required for registration (see www.hpc-uk.org/publications/standards/). The competencies and perspectives that are shared by applied psychologists are often greater and more important than the specific issues that distinguish our specialist areas.

Traditionally, NHS psychology posts have been advertised with particular adjectival titles: ‘clinical psychologist’, ‘counselling psychologist’, ‘health psychologist’, etc. Clearly, in some cases, this is appropriate. If, for instance, the duties of the postholder map squarely onto the accepted competencies of a specific specialist (such as health psychologist), or if the post requires, as an essential element, competencies that are not found across specialties, then clearly it is right to make that clear in advertisements.

The use of competencies will differentiate between those posts which may be more appropriate for one branch of the profession rather than another, without excluding potential candidates on the basis of an adjectival title or particular professional training route. Practising psychologists are professionally regulated by the HPC through the Council’s Register. This and the Society’s own Code of Ethics and Conduct specifically prohibits practitioner psychologists from claiming competencies that they do not possess.

Managers should ensure that job titles and person specifications should be inclusive to the various applied psychologists who may be suitable for the post. If you require further information please contact ppbchair@bps.org.uk.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Peter Kinderman
Chair, Standing Committee for Psychologists in Health and Social Care.

Antony Vassalos
Chair, Unite’s Applied Psychologists’ National Occupational Advisory Committee.