

From Psychotherapist to Psycho-activist: How Therapy is Becoming Derailed

By **Val Thomas**

This is a public health warning: the seal on the tin labelled *Counselling and Psychotherapy* has been tampered with and the contents have become contaminated. Mainstream culture has been captured by Critical Social Justice, an ideology that prioritises group identity over the individual. The wholesale adoption of this belief system threatens to change the practice of therapy into something no longer therapeutic, but political.

Counselling and Psychotherapy Reflect Wider Cultural Changes

So, how has an overtly political ideology managed to gain access to the clinical space and potentially change the nature of the encounter between therapist and client?

Therapy has, of course, always reflected wider intellectual and societal shifts. In the US immediately after the end of the Second World War, for example, the existing services were ill suited to meet the challenges of returning soldiers who had experienced battlefield trauma. Furthermore, the pre-war psychoanalytic practices appeared elitist in a more democratic age. These new social conditions resulted in the creation of new therapeutic approaches, such as Carl Rogers' person-centred counselling.

Another example of how therapy responded to cultural changes can be seen towards the end of the twentieth century, when postmodern perspectives started to influence therapy. Language and narrative are of central importance in postmodernism, which takes the view that discourses both generate and maintain the social world. This intellectual movement gave rise to significant new therapeutic approaches such as narrative therapy, whose basic premise is that helping people make changes to the stories they tell about themselves will result in positive change. There was also increasing acceptance of a fundamental tenet of postmodernism, which is that the self is socially constructed—our identities are shaped by external social and cultural forces. This marked a move away from individualism towards the collective. Until very recently, psychological therapies have generally adapted to these new perspectives by incorporating them into an increasingly pluralistic therapeutic field.

Counselling and Psychotherapy Have Political Dimensions

Therapy has often regarded itself as an agent of social change. For example, during the human potential movement of the 1960s and 70s, the humanistic schools of therapy were explicit about their aims of challenging repressive social conditioning and freeing individuals to live more authentic, self-expressive lives. Therapy has also been harnessed by outside agencies for political ends. For example, in 2006 the UK government set up the Improving Access to Psychological Services (IAPT) programmes delivered through the NHS, with the rationale that therapeutic interventions could reduce claims for unemployment benefits.

Some might view the increasing emphasis on social justice activism within counselling and psychotherapy as just a contemporary expression of how the therapy professions respond to wider societal changes, particularly as therapy has historically concerned itself with issues of social justice. However, Critical Social Justice is an authoritarian viewpoint, not informed by liberal values. As such, it cannot be integrated into the field of therapy.

Why Critical Social Justice is Incompatible with Therapy

Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay's book [Cynical Theories](#) has helped to clarify how a recent fusion of postmodern ideas with Critical Theory has resulted in Critical Social Justice: a politically actionable ideology that views human society as comprising identity groups located within a matrix of power. This worldview is incompatible with therapy, two of whose most fundamental tenets are the fostering of individual agency and the facilitative power of the therapeutic relationship. Critical Social Justice views individualism as arising out of the European Enlightenment tradition and consequently as problematic: group membership is what counts. As a member of a particular identity group, a person's lived experience is shaped by social and cultural narratives. A person's group identity is characterised as either marginalised/oppressed or privileged/oppressor. According to intersectionality, the greater the number of marginalised identities a person has, the greater her claim to moral authority. Its proponents must continuously work to make these power positions visible and disrupt and dismantle the dominant systems in society.

There is no way to reconcile Critical Social Justice with the fundamental tenet that the relationship offered by the clinician is a vehicle for the therapy. Relationships are primarily construed by this ideology as encounters between members of identity groups and are consequently viewed through the lens of power. The therapist's and client's memberships of particular identity groups will determine the nature of the exchange. The relationship can only be transactional. (I've written at more length about this [here](#).)

How Critical Social Justice is Able to Infiltrate Therapy

Critical Social Justice is a totalising ideology, intolerant of any other perspective: its goal is not to be integrated but to take over, through well-established routes that include infiltrating bureaucratic administrations, changing discourses and re-education.

Even the most cursory inspection of the main professional bodies in the US and the UK reveals the degree to which they have been captured by Critical Social Justice ideology. For example, in 2018, the American Psychological Association, the body responsible for licensing mental health counsellors nationwide, released updated [guidance for working with boys and men](#), which characterised traits ascribed to traditional masculinity as toxic. Despite significant criticism, the APA did not revise its guidelines. This year, in the wake of the death of George Floyd, the APA has issued a [public statement](#) committing itself to ridding the country of systemic racism. There is no explanation of why an organisation that should be apolitical should promote political activism. The association has also issued [a press statement](#) condemning the presidential executive order banning Critical Race Theory based trainings at federal agencies. The APA's [statement](#) disingenuously suggests that all types of diversity training will be restricted. All the main talking therapy professional bodies have gone down the same route: practice guidance documents are imbued with Critical Social Justice concepts such as intersectionality and public statements are replete with the mantra of diversity, inclusion and equity. Even if such statements do not reflect of the views of most of their members, this official line makes it harder for individual therapists to maintain an independent stance.

The Deployment of Rhetorical Strategies

The postmodern perspective adopted by Critical Social Justice emphasises the role of language in shaping social reality. This ideology, even though it is now orthodoxy in mainstream culture, continues to represent itself as an edgy challenge to the status quo, which promises the delicious thrill of being against an oppressive system without any threat to one's professional standing or income. This is similar to marketing ploys that suggest that owning expensive consumer goods make

you stand out as cool and rebellious—rather than the reality that you are a gullible member of the herd. Any criticism can thus be deflected as reactionary. This is a rhetorical move designed to appeal to immature minds.

The Capture of Professional Education

New generations of practitioners are being trained to accept not only a different way of achieving social justice, but also that achieving social justice is the job of therapy. These ideas have been entering professional therapy education by way of the compulsory diversity modules—an important training component designed to prepare students for working with diverse client groups. Until relatively recently, students were taught multicultural competencies and anti-oppressive practice as part of a syllabus informed by liberal notions of social justice. But the new generations of practitioners are being required to accept a different, ideological approach, in which, increasingly, any questioning of notions such as systemic inequities, intersectionality or white privilege is viewed as a pathology (I've written more about this [here](#)). The goal is the creation of therapist-activists, who will diagnose presenting problems through a collective lens and use the client-therapist encounter to inculcate an ideology that fosters grievance and victimhood: the only solution offered to presenting problems will be a never-ending political activism. This disastrous trajectory will surely be speeded up as younger generations, who have been imbibing this ideology in their school and college educations, arrive in the training centres.

Why There is no Public Discussion of the Threat to Therapy

You would be hard pressed to find anyone in the profession critiquing Critical Social Justice. The reason is simple: dissent comes at a significant professional cost. Even a straightforward expression of opposition exposes the person to attacks on her character and professional practice. For example, this summer, the British Psychological Society (BPS) published a [resignation letter in which Dr Kirsty Miller](#) explains that she feels unable to continue to be associated with the society due to its increasingly politicised stance. The BPS then decided to take the highly unusual step of retracting the original letter. The editor gave [a detailed justification of his decision](#) that in the main devolved to concerns that some of BPS's members had expressed feelings of hurt. Miller was consequently subjected to a social media mobbing campaign aimed at destroying her professional reputation.

Conclusion

If you are a client looking for a therapist, caveat emptor! The counsellor or psychotherapist you are considering may not be practising traditional therapy: they may have signed up to an anti-therapeutic political ideology that fosters grievance and pushes activism as the only solution to life's difficulties. So it is worth asking your therapist, *What is your position on social justice and intersectionality?* Psychotherapist or psycho-activist—this distinction will determine the course of therapy.

This article was originally published in Areo Magazine on 23rd November 2020.