CHAPTER SEVEN

WORK TOWARDS IMPROVING DIVERSITY WITHIN A PSYCHOTHERAPY ORGANISATION

And because we have too much information,
And no clear direction
Too many facts,
And not enough faith;
Too much confusion
And crave clear visions;
Too many fears,
And not enough light –
I whisper to myself modest maxims
As thought-friends for a new age
See clearly, think clearly.
Face pleasant and unpleasant truths;
Face reality.
Free the past.
Catch up with ourselves.
Never cease from upward striving.
We are better than we think.
Don't be afraid to love, or be loved
As within, so without
We owe life abundant happiness.
From *Mental Fight* by Ben Okri

Introduction

For about 12 years I have been working, not only in my own practice as a psychotherapist and supervisor, but also on a more public stage in various organisations, to try to increase diversity within the psychotherapy profession.

In this chapter I turn from my work as a psychotherapist with individuals to my work with psychotherapy organisations. As I showed in the last chapter, psychotherapy is a very 'white' profession so their organisations are imbued

with a ‘white’ culture. This organisation forms part of the complex web of institutions which keep white, western culture powerful. Three questions I have in relation to this work are:

- How does being white within a white organisation influence the psychotherapy work undertaken within it?
- How are non-white people affected by contact with ‘white’ psychotherapy organisations?
- What steps could be taken to ensure that ‘white’ psychotherapy organisations become more conscious of their whiteness, its impact on non-white people, and how that impact can be mitigated?

Although I have worked with several different psychotherapy organisations I have taken the one I have worked most intensively as a ‘case study’ to illustrate the points I wish to make. This organisation is the Bath Centre for Psychotherapy and Counselling (BCPC).

In approaching these questions I am aware of the difficulty of acting wisely in the challenging political field of encouraging diversity within organisations. I have found that, whilst it is easy to say and to feel that organisations benefit by the richness that diversity brings, it also brings the potential for conflict. Organisations themselves build up powerful cultures (Trompenaars 1993) which are just as jealously guarded as national ones. Peter Senge et al (1999:334) have pointed out that cultures do not change so much as evolve as new habits of thinking and acting gradually take hold. As cultural organising principles are held unconsciously, a consciously held desire to change may not be sufficiently effective. At BCPC, particularly as I am a central figure, I am central to the culture and this affects my ability to bring about changes in it as I will show below. Those outside the culture are in a better position to challenge me as 'the last one to know about the sea is a fish' (Hawkins 1995).

This part of my inquiry is situated within a 'third person' realm (Torbert 2001:256) in that it engages with wider systems than the personal or interpersonal. I did not set out to do this work with research in mind but retrospectively I have brought an action research ‘mind’ to bear on this data, some of which occurred before I undertook my inquiry. Some of the date accrued concurrently with it.

My stance to my activities, whether or not they occurred before the onset of my research project, has been inquiring and dialogic in nature and arises naturally from the kind of reflection inherent in psychotherapy practice (See chapter 3). My approach demonstrates that I have undertaken this work in a spirit of dialogue which, as I have explained and explored in Chapter 2, is the methodology which underlies all of this inquiry.

In this chapter I look at various aspects of my work within BCPC. I start with an area which is the most 'political' in that I explore how I have tried to influence structural and policy changes in the area of equal opportunities. In the following section of this chapter I discuss one specific area of equal opportunities that I have felt to be particularly important: the encouragement of diversity within the organisation – particularly racial diversity, as this seemed to me to be the area in which BCPC as well as other psychotherapy organisations were least diverse. It is also the area which most demonstrates the 'whiteness' of the organisation.

Just as I explored my own personal ‘whiteness’ in chapter 2, this chapter also shows that BCPC takes part in the institutionalisation of whiteness within our society. The very fact that it is almost unthinkable to describe BCPC as a ‘white’ organisation demonstrates the point. As I showed in chapter 2, whiteness tends not to be think-aboutable because it is apparently neutral (Rodriguez 1998:45). It is the ground from which other

things are seen. In asserting that whiteness has content (Rodriguez 1998:31), this concept is radically challenged: we can see more clearly how those who are not white are made into those who are 'different', particularly if the black people within it fall foul of unquestioned assumptions held within the organisation. BCPC can 'perform whiteness', as Rodrigez puts it (Rodriguez 1998:53), on whites and non-whites alike in these unquestioned assumptions. White culture is just taken as 'normal'.

Working towards equal opportunities in organisations

I first turn to the Equal Opportunities Committee as it is often the place in which issues of race and culture are discussed within organisations. If any part of the organisation is likely to be aware that the organisation is 'white' it is the equal opportunities committee and I have certainly found this to be so in the committees I have worked on, including that of BCPC. Although talk of the 'whiteness' of the organisation has not been explicitly articulated, it is the kind of idea that is likely to be accepted and reflected upon. The Equal Opportunities Committee is the channel through which most organisations direct their energies towards ensuring cultural diversity and inclusivity, but these very committees can be marginalised, just as black people are marginalised. So is the Equal Opportunities Committee like a 'black' person within an organisation – often marginalised, but when brought into the centre can feel as if they have been silenced? There are indicators that this was the case with the BCPC committee as I show below.

It is my experience that these committees are often on the edges of organisations, pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable and often a thorn in the sides of those in charge. Maybe equal opportunities ought to be at the heart of a healthy organisation – one that welcomes and encourages diversity – and every aspect of the organisation should be imbued with the spirit of these policies. Nevertheless, I wonder whether it is inevitable that equal opportunities are on the margins. If they are not then maybe there is

a danger of such policies becoming collusive with the status quo. Equal opportunities policies are about challenging those that are in the dominant group to ensure that those who are less dominant have the same chances. However well intentioned the management of an organisation, it is bound to represent the dominant group by its organisational position and therefore cannot be seen to be disinterested in putting these policies in place. Having explored and reflected on my experiences below, I will reflect further on where the Equal Opportunities Committee may best be placed within organisations. I wonder how far the marginalization of Equal Opportunities Committees is similar to, or a parallel with, the marginalization of 'black' people and therefore should be central, or is it, in fact, better placed at the margins in order to better stand back and comment on the organisation's arrangements? I will explore this question below having set out my experience of this work.

In 1997 I initiated the Equal Opportunities Committee of BCPC. I thought it was important that I was not the Chair because my leading role within the organisation might create a conflict of interest or, at least, affect my credibility as seriously wanting to challenge the organisation and myself within this leading role. We did some important work such as writing the equal opportunities policy, working with particular individuals who had special needs; looking at improving accessibility and generally challenging the different committees regarding their response to equal opportunities including the content of the curriculum and the teaching of it. For some years this was productive and at least partially successful in giving matters of cultural difference a higher profile in the organisation. Now the curriculum takes cultural difference into account at all stages of the training as a matter of course and an extra module called *Working with Difference* has been added.

Although these changes were significant and a step in the right direction, the basic culture is inevitably still 'white'. The vast majority of its members are white which unavoidably affected its basic assumptions. After three years on the committee I left because of pressure of work and a colleague joined the committee. However when she left for similar reasons the committee only lasted about a year and no longer meets. So did my and my colleague's leaving take the equal opportunities committee too far to the margins of the organisation? It seems that without the strong leadership of myself and my colleague the committee felt demoralized. However, a new initiative to start the committee is now in the air.

The work on this committee was interesting as I continually found myself to be both the challenger and challenged. My position as the powerful and symbolically 'white' person was present, as was the part of me that identified with those with less power – symbolically the 'black' person. The constant shifting of this position demonstrates both a need to be constantly dialogic, as it necessitated really listening to others' point of view, as well as a real engagement in cycles of action (in the organization) and reflection (in the committee meeting) so that grounded learning arose from this engagement. It also meant that listening to myself from each viewpoint could deepen my understanding of others' positions.

For example, I had to face the fact that the inadequacies of the BCPC curriculum were partly my doing. It was a lesson in non-defensiveness. I sometimes felt that the committee did not understand why we had designed a curriculum in the way that we had. For instance, the first year of the training was more experiential than theory-driven so I felt that challenging 'white' psychotherapy *theory* was not appropriate, but when I was able to be dialogic and confront my defensiveness I could see that they were right: whatever our reasons, students were not engaging with societal issues and the way that they impact on the psychotherapy relationship. However well

intentioned I was, BCPC was basically still a ‘white’ organisation and, as such, unlikely to attract ‘black’ students. I discovered that the more I was able to make my communications with others dialogic and non-defensive the more I have been able to make effective changes. For instance, the more undefensive I became on the equal opportunities committee the more understood the kinds of changes that needed to be made, such as changes to the curriculum.

Some of these changes in the organization happened at a 'staff weekend' (where the staff reflect on the curriculum). At this particular weekend, the way in which the course attends to cultural difference was discussed and various changes put in place. As the discussion deepened into dialogue – a real listening to each other - the staff could see that making changes of this sort was not a matter of unthinkingly obeying 'politically correct' dogma and they became more open to making changes. Now that we have a staff group that automatically think that difference in culture has an important influence on the work and should be included in the training.

Much more recently, when engaging in this inquiry, I decided to enter into another cycle of action and reflection. I wondered if, as those in power, such as myself, were ostensibly in favour of equal opportunities, it was harder for those on the edge to be appropriately challenging and this in itself was a block to change. I showed a previous draft of this writing to someone who, as a student, had been a committed member of the equal opportunities committee. She felt that the committee seemed to be taken more seriously by the organisation when my colleague and I were members but that generally it felt very marginal, ‘despite all intentions to the contrary'. In relation to the question of whether or not the equal opportunities committee should be marginal or central she had this to say:

'Perhaps it has a need to be marginal. It almost feels to me like having one foot in the organisation and one foot out, being able to see two sides, holding both in some way - a bit like therapy process itself, I think.'
Email correspondence August 2004

This raises a question for me about whether there is a fine line to walk for equal opportunities committees. Do they flourish under oppressive regimes as members unite against it, which occurred in one organization? Or is the challenge from such committees stifled when management try to be on the margins as well as at the centre? As this dynamic is evident to me in various settings, I will return to this matter at the end of this chapter.

In the light of our experience it may have been worth considering the approach of Deborah Meyerson who has written a book about what she has termed 'tempered radicals' (Meyerson 2001). Meyerson advocates an approach which 'straddles trying to fit in and trying to be different' (Meyerson 2002:1). She is looking for ways in which individuals can make small 'stands' that can lead to something different. For instance, members of BCPC's equal opportunities committee could have found some examples of 'white' theory and sent them to relevant staff and the training committee for comment.

She says tempered radicals 'start small and then amplify.' They build 'narratives around their small wins' (Meyerson 2002:3). Meyerson points out that people may regard her approach as 'wimpy' (Meyerson 2002:1) but that it may be more effective than head-on clashes with management. Maybe an insistence on not being 'wimpy' can disguise a narcissistic desire to do something that is more apparently 'glorious' however ineffective and it could be an attempt to deal with personal, unresolved authority issues.

Maybe Meyerson's work shows a way through some of the dilemmas I have outlined above. An equal opportunities committee on the margins can gradually influence the organisation to make changes.

Encouraging Cultural Diversity within BCPC

As well as work on the equal opportunities committee, I spearheaded various attempts to encourage BCPC to be more culturally diverse. I wondered, though, if these changes were likely to be sufficiently radical and thoroughgoing enough to ensure that the organisation was not 'white'. The success of these venture was mixed, though in all cases there was, and is, much to learn. I explore below four different initiatives. These are:

1. Initiatives to encourage a greater number of black students
2. Initiatives to encourage more black staff members
3. The running of an introductory course which addresses intercultural issues. (This was put in place partly in order to achieve number one above.)
4. A project for providing free counselling and psychotherapy to asylum seekers and refugees.

Initiatives to encourage more black students into the organisation

Various attempts were made to encourage a more diverse student group. Only limited movement on this issue has occurred since it was instituted so my inquiry here is into the reasons for this disappointing outcome.

My first attempt was to write a leaflet encouraging applications from black people. It was sent to work places and organisations which were likely to have staff who may want to undertake counselling or psychotherapy training. In retrospect this seems a very naïve approach. From my perspective today it is not surprising that it produced no result at all. I now know from the experiences outlined below that 'cold calling' in this way is

likely to be unproductive. We needed to show the 'black community'[1] much more clearly that we were in earnest

The first breakthrough on our understanding of this followed contact with the Bath Racial Equality Council (BREC) (see below). As well as reiterating the need to make links with other organizations, they were sure that the prohibitive cost of the training was another factor that discouraged 'black' students. This led to us deciding to set up a scholarship fund for black students to address the often stated difficulty that black students are unable to afford the cost of training (Samuels 1993; Akinsete 2002). My sense that BREC was right about this was backed up by my own experience (at South West London College) that subsidised college courses were far more likely to have a culturally diverse student community.

We set up a committee to take this initiative forward and a member of BREC agreed to sit on it. He was very enthusiastic about the aims of our work and helped us to network with various organisations by making introductions. We finally acquired some funding and have managed to fund several students through the Introductory Course and one student was accepted to be funded through the main training though she had to leave as she had a sick young child and the pressure was too much for her. We had decided to pay for special supervision/mentoring for black students as we knew that there were many pressures on them as a result of being so much in the minority. I think, given her remarks to us, the black student who did come forward felt much better supported in BCPC than the previous one and other previous black students. Unfortunately, in spite of our encouragement, she did not take up the mentoring we offered, citing pressure of time. Since then we have funded several people for the

[1] Of course the 'black community' is not an entity. There are various different 'black and minority ethnic' populations in Bath and Bristol. Making contact with them for these purposes seemed easiest by approaching community associations and the Bath and Bristol Racial Equality Councils. This was one way of reaching people from several different groups.

Introductory Course. As I write another student has been offered a grant for the main training. With our last experience we have decided to be even more strenuous in encouraging the student to take up the mentoring. We can use our experience to back up this encouragement.

The few black students we have had on the training have found it very difficult, partly because of their isolation and partly because their perspective was not really understood. Yvonne Joseph, who was then a black student, now a graduate, made this comment about her time as a student at BCPC:

> 'As our histories were so diverse (colonial vs colonised) there were times when I did not feel understood. I longed for others of similar journeys with whom I could share these experiences, without first having to explain anything. In such situations the loneliness and isolation can be palpable, although you are surrounded by people.'
>
> *Written at my request on reading a draft of this chapter 25th June 2004*

This kind of feedback led those of us who run the black scholarship fund to insist on a black supervisor/mentor for any black student.

The scholarship fund has had some limited success but has not been the break-through we hoped for. My time and energy for fundraising has been overtaken by the Project for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (see below) and, as my colleague said (see below), no one with a passion for it has come forward since then to take on the scholarship fund though one colleague helps me to keep it ticking over.

I have come to understand that, in order to achieve a more diverse student group we need to work towards being less 'white' as an organisation. Even more importantly I have come to understand that an organisation does not become less 'white' by introducing more black people within it. This attitude

is ‘tokenistic’ in that it brings black people into the organisation to ‘show’ diversity. My inquiry into my own ‘whiteness’ has helped me to understand this thoroughly – not just intellectually. I can also see that we cannot just decide not to be ‘white’. The most we can manage at present is to understand our own ‘whiteness’ and acknowledge its effects. I can now see that greater understanding of our organisation’s ‘whiteness’ lead to:

- A curriculum which acknowledges this ‘whiteness’ and is open to other cultural assumptions and positions on psychotherapy theory
- A more dialogic stance to non-white students
- An engagement with non-white communities
- More black staff and clients
- An engagement with the difficulty of affording the course.

Initiatives to encourage ‘black’ staff members

As another, probably tokenistic, way of encouraging diversity, we agreed to advertise for a black staff member. As with the encouragememt of black students, we had had feedback from the ‘black community,’ such as from BREC, that ‘black’ people were more likely to attend the course if there was at least one black staff member. We did manage to make a good appointment but this person's circumstances changed and she was not able to work with us for long. Before she left she and I worked together on the introductory course called *Listening in a Multicultural Setting* (see below). After she had left we had a conversation, which I documented at the time, in which, amongst other things, I asked her about whether she experienced a power difference between us:

> 'Marilyn [my colleague] said that although this had been clear by what we had said in the first ‘round’ at the start of the course, she had not felt that the group regarded her as ‘lesser’ in any way and had not felt that I regarded her as such. We talked about how important it was for black people not to be hived off into

only teaching intercultural areas and she was pleased that BCPC had wanted her to teach on the ordinary course. Marilyn said that she was quite capable of noticing if she was being exploited and was very used to challenging such situations. She had done so on many occasions. Again I remarked on her strength in being able to do so. She laughed a lot and looked as if she was able to find life's challenges interesting and that they did not affect her basic sense of self.'

June 2001 and quoted in MSc/PhD Transfer paper September 2001

I asked her to read and comment on the account of our conversation and, in relation to the above quote, she wrote the following:

'I felt that the power dynamic between Judy and myself was complementary. Yes I was not a teacher or had qualifications to corroborate this in the same way as Judy. However my style is useful and significant. Judy is experienced in mainstream teaching and I in group facilitation and training, particularly in education. I feel we learn from each other. Some of that is explicit and the rest more subtle.'

24th August 2001 and quoted in MSc/PhD Transfer paper September 2001

It does seem from her account that this black trainer did not feel that BCPC had treated her badly in spite of the fears of the co-ordinator of training (see below) though I am aware that many subtle factors may have been brought to bear on this situation. This staff member has never experienced being in the 'racial' majority. Her leaving left me with an uneasy feeling that she may have stayed if the organisation had been less 'white'. This feels to me to be a subtle matter and not easily changed through policy making.

More recently a new black female staff member of Indian origin has been appointed to run the Introductory Course with a white male staff member. I discuss her experiences below. More people of 'minority ethnic groups' are

coming forward for the training (see below), It remains to be seen if this feeds through to the main training.

The introductory course: Listening in a Multicultural Setting

We set up an Introductory Course in the hope that it would encourage potential students into the training who may feel tentative about approaching us. The curriculum included basic counselling skills and theory but we put them all within an intercultural context so that the theories could be evaluated and understood as arising from a cultural context. Specific intercultural issues were included in their own right as well. We hoped that by weighting the curriculum in this way we could encourage a more diverse group of participants.

This has had some success in encouraging a more diverse student group, particularly recently, and also, more marginally, in encouraging a more diverse group into the main training. It is disappointing that in spite of some progress our membership diversity has not been greatly improved. Maybe we need to be patient as all these initiatives may be small factors creating change over time, as Meyerson (2001) would suggest.

When I stopped teaching the Introductory course I had the following conversation with my colleague, Whiz Collis. She thought the original intention had been 'watered down':

> **W**. My understanding is that the introductory course which started off as Listening Skills in a Multicultural Setting to encourage students from ethnic minority students to come forward, has now been rather watered down as it was carrying two purposes, one to introduce people to our training and the other to carry the multicultural aspect and I think the emphasis has changed. I think it is now more on introducing us, simply because we never had anyone from any of the minority ethnic groups that we wanted to encourage. [This was not in fact entirely true though I did not pick this up at the time]

J. It rather suggests an attitude that these matters are only interesting to minority groups.

W. And I don't think the attitude has changed but the emphasis has changed and we now call it a 'Listening Skills in a Multicultural Society' rather than a 'Multicultural Setting' as lots of people were not working in a multicultural setting and therefore thought they could not come on the intro course.

Transcribed tape of a conversation held on 12th February 2004

On reflection I can see that it is hard to maintain an attitude within the ethos of the organisation and British society at large, that difference in culture affects us all and not just those who are part of minority groups. Maybe this is an illustration of how we all partake in a field of consciousness rather than as isolated minds so that we cannot make great shifts in individuals without there being a shift in group consciousness. Trying to make changes in myself and other individuals is hard without a more cultural shift within BCPC as a whole, and it is difficult to make a shift in BCPC when society has a different ethos. On the other hand maybe it is small shifts in individuals that eventually make a change to cultural patterns of thought or 'organising principles' (Stolorow and Atwood 1992:55). It seems that there were subtle (not overt) pressures on me to make more of BCPC's agenda to design a more general course for the public. This was especially true as members of the public thought that a course that was slanted towards intercultural matters was not for them unless they worked in multicultural settings. In saying there were 'pressures on me', I am not meaning that I was pressurised to do something against my better judgment. I mean that, given the usual organising principles that ran through BCPC and myself, this is what emerged.

Since I recorded this conversation with Whiz (above) I have become the supervisor for this course which is now run by Ounkar Kaur, an Indian woman and Tony Voss, a white man, as I mentioned above. They have

been considering changes to the curriculum so that the intercultural aspects of the curriculum come out more clearly.

Intercultural issues between the two trainers have also usefully been brought to bear on the learning within the course concerning the meaning and use of eye contact. Ounkar told us that, within her culture, eye contact in not considered proper when in the company of men who are not of her family of origin, though she has learnt to conform with British mores in this regard. The white man is a Gestaltist. Gestalt therapy, with its focus on contact, commonly emphasises the importance of making eye contact, along with other psychotherapy and counselling approaches. Ounkar said that she had ‘learned' to make eye contact with men through her western counselling training. This cultural difference came to their attention early on in the life of the course and led to an interesting intercultural conversation between the two of them and with me in supervision.

In an email correspondence Tony told me that, although Gestaltists may ask clients to experiment with making eye contact, especially in order to check out the reality of a fantasy about another group member, ‘they may see that the other is looking at them with kindness and not judging them or threatening them as they had feared’, for instance. He said that Gestalt Therapy always takes the ‘field’ into account which in this situation included a difference in culture. He suggested that ‘in Asian culture a woman making eye contact with a man might be seen as inviting unwelcome attention. In these cases eye contact may not be conducive to good quality contact - indeed it might lead to quite the opposite’.

He sees the main point of the intercultural conversation as the fact that they had

‘voiced, particularly in supervision, whether, in adopting eye contact between us, Ounkar had moved on to my ground more than I had on to hers. Had the 'white' expectations been dominant? How might I have adjusted my ways of contacting her more, so that we met more halfway?

As Ounkar says, this is an ongoing exploration. Perhaps it is a legitimate case of finding what works well for us in the current field. Maybe eye contact within the framework of our professional work together is useful (when co-facilitating a group for example it is very useful way of communicating), whereas in a different field (had we met socially elsewhere for example) it might not be so appropriate?’

August 2005

Discussing this between them and in bringing it to supervision, a fruitful dialogue about these differences developed and affected their relationship. Differences of perspective could be acknowledged both between them and with course members. Through this process of acknowledgement of difference, rigid ideas about appropriate and helpful behaviour could be loosened. The hunger for solutions was temporarily stayed.

This intercultural dialogue, the small increase in the diversity of the student body and the developing curriculum are all signs that some progress is being made in relaxing the rigid structure of this ‘white’ organisation. It seems to me that, if we are to build on this progress, we will need to remain interested in these kinds of intercultural dialogues and vigilant that we continue to have them. In saying this maybe I am building a narrative around a ‘small win’ as Meyerson suggests (2001), particularly by sharing this thought with the people concerned.

Project for Counselling and Psychotherapy with Refugees and Asylum Seekers: an initiative which encouraged a more diverse client group

The third of my projects for encouraging greater diversity in the client group of the organisation is a counselling and psychotherapy service for asylum seekers and refugees. In contrast, by building on past learning, this project has been extremely successful in this aim. I had asked the BCPC membership if they would like to join with me in trying to set up a project for this work and about fifteen people volunteered for the steering group. Through previous learning I had found that it was vital to network with others in the community if this was to be successful. Our project was immediately welcomed by all those we contacted. Maybe this is because we had learnt that we need to have something valuable to offer and that meets expressed need. The measures we decided upon were directly influenced by my inquiry: an emphasis on making good links with relevant agencies, to provide a free service and to ensure that counselors and psychotherapists receive very good quality support, training and supervision in an intersubjective, culturally sensitive approach. Specifically the measures we took were as follows:

1. Provision of free counselling and psychotherapy.
2. The making of links with relevant agencies such as Refugee Action, the Bristol Refugee Interagency Forum, The Haven (health care for asylum seekers) and the Interpreter Users Network.
3. The making of links with another local psychotherapy organisation, Bridge Foundation, a Bristol-based organisation that works with children and families, while we work with adult individuals.

4. The taking of advice from the national organisation with most experience of work in this area - the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture[2].
5. Application for funding. We found two funders after two years' work that have given us substantial grants: The Lloyds TSB Foundation and the Equator Trust. The William Cadbury Trust has given us a smaller grant as has The Norrie Trust. The latter gave us money for the training of interpreters and we share this with the Bridge Foundation.
6. The use of only senior trainees and qualified therapists to see asylum seekers and refugees as we felt that the complexity of working with people who have been traumatized warranted this measure.
7. Giving these counsellors and psychotherapists extra training and supervision as the main training did not focus sufficiently on the needs of this client group.

Having made these decisions we instituted weekend courses for therapists who also then attend monthly extra supervision/training if they have refugee or asylum seeker clients. Jeremy Woodcock who worked for many years at The Medical Foundation for the Care of the Victims of Torture became our trainer and supervisor. His experience and personal style provide a good holding presence for our work in this area and is invaluable to our learning.

The curriculum of the course includes the following:

- information about the typical experiences of asylum seekers, both in their country of origin and in this country;
- working with cultural difference;

[2] The Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture is a well-known and pioneering centre in London, not only for victims of torture, but also for the treatment of asylum seekers and

- working with trauma and
- working with interpreters.

Working with cultural difference and trauma are both also taught on the BCPC main training so this is not the course participants' first input on these subjects. The cultural diversity of the client groups of psychotherapists working in the West Country would normally be overwhelmingly white, English people, so the cultural diversity of the practice of the nineteen people working within this Service was greatly extended. All who work within it appreciate this fact as can be seen in the comments below.

We have also carried out two courses for interpreters. Work with interpreters has a steep learning curve but we are helped by our trainer who is very experienced in work with refugees and has encouraged us to see the interpreter, not as a sort of interpreting machine, but as another human being in the room with a role to play. Psychotherapists are not used to 'sharing' their clients with others and this brings a particular challenge. A member of the project wrote thoughtfully about this in the BCPC Newsletter. She disclosed both her own reactivity and hostility to the situation followed by a thoughtful response which revealed her ability to reflect on her own responses under stress. Because she has made so many interesting points I will quote her article in detail. She also showed how the process of reflecting affects her work. She wrote:

> I look at my client intensely while he is speaking: his bodily response, breathing and tone of voice tell me something about the volcano of anger dissimulated under the polite tone of voice. The translation of all this comes back to me via the interpreter in a rather short and unemotional sentence. What has been lost in translation? My paranoid schizoid part is triggered and I read a tacit

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refugees suffering with mental health problems.

complicity – if not collusion - between the interpreter and the client from which I feel excluded.

Later on in the session, the interpreter takes the initiative to ask my client something which will remain untranslated, I feel more and more like an observer while core issues are dealt with behind my back but, ironically, just in front of me. It feels very crowded and out of control. The interpreter seems to be leading the session which looks like a cross-examination. I think of Buber and I am filled with despair: how can I ever experience the healing of an I-Thou moment in this overcrowded setting? I have to process not only my own countertransference with the client but also the transference with the interpreter. What's more I bear in mind that some interpreters have themselves gone through devastating and damaging experiences.

The potential intimacy between two people has to make some space for the arrival of a third person. This makes me think of the arrival of a child in a couple who have to learn how to share responsibilities, care and nurture. Severe traumas like rape and torture are unbearable to expose and need the intimacy of the safe therapeutic space in order to be processed. How can this space include a third person who cannot be just a translator, a witness, an observer or a voyeur?

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After various experiences with interpreters, my thoughts have become more nuanced. I have now been working with one of the interpreters for nearly two years. I can only praise the working alliance we have built up together. This is why I have come to the conclusion that, despite something being inevitably lost in translation, something invaluable, precious and immensely supportive is gained from the triad. The shared mutual respect and understanding for the aims of the therapeutic alliance provides in the long run a safe environment akin to the traditional family of the client. This can help some asylum seekers to restore the meaning of their lives after the destructive and traumatic experiences they have been through (Gaveaux 2005).

I can identify with all those feelings and have reached a similar conclusion. When I fully accept that the interpreter is a valid part of the working alliance then what is lost in the intimacy between two people who speak the same language is replaced by a family-like situation in which the different relationships all have importance and meaning and the triad itself provides a holding space. I give an example of this work in the following chapter.

To help us with this work we belong to a Bristol Interpreter User's Forum which was set up by Refugee Action. On their request we developed a 'good practice' paper for interpreter's work with counsellors and psychotherapists (see appendix 6).

So in what ways has the project been successful in increasing the cultural diversity of BCPC? We have trained 23 people to do this work and 19 are presently active in the scheme. By October 2004 we had had 137[3] referrals and 87 of these have received counselling or psychotherapy. Thirty four were being seen at that time with 29 on the waiting list.

Of those 87 clients that we had seen by October 2004, 32 nationalities were represented with 36 of these coming from Somalia. This was by far the biggest group as it has the largest asylum seeker and refugee population in Bristol.

So what are the key factors that we have learnt through this work that have helped us make the project successful? It seems that involvement in the community, greater flexibility in the boundaries of the psychotherapy and therapist commitment are key. In particular we have:

[3] I give the figures for 2004 here as the full statistics for 2005 are not yet collated. However, I do know that the number of referrals to date, at the beginning of October 2005 is 214.

- learnt that it is important to become known in the community and work alongside other organisations if we are to have credibility with them.
- become central to an important multi-agency, Bristol-based initiative to set up a centre for refugees and asylum seekers called Holding Refugees in Mind. This followed a conference that we launched with the Bridge Foundation.
- made ourselves known to GPs, community organisations and asylum seekers groups and these are our main source of referrals.
- learnt that we need to be flexible and resilient. For instance we frequently have difficulties making initial contacts. Often clients do not know what to expect. Having been contacted, one of my clients thought she was going to see a town councilor, for instance. Frequently clients are so traumatised and disorientated by their experiences that it is hard for them to remember session times. We find, encouraged by our supervisor, that we sometimes have to walk the extra mile to help our clients attend the sessions, such as reminding them on the phone the day before. Sometimes this is difficult as their mobile phones might well not be charged or switched on.
- ensured that the work is rewarding for the therapists. Most of the counsellors and psychotherapists find this work absorbing and rewarding as well as difficult and challenging and are therefore highly committed (see below). We provide good quality support and supervision and there is no problem in persuading therapists to attend, although it is extra to their normal supervision. They find the work interesting and personally challenging and so feel the need for the extra support.

I asked the therapists working in the project to send me their comments about the work to help me with the writing of a report. All commented that

the clients seem to appreciate their sessions and benefit by them. Some said that the need to find a place where difficulties can be shared was of the utmost importance, particularly for those who have lost their families (see counsellor's comments below).

So does this mean that we can consider that psychotherapy is a useful and relevant option for distressed, disturbed and traumatized individuals who do not come from ‘western’ backgrounds? Often we find that asylum seeker clients would not normally consider sharing with strangers that which is usually private to the family. It does seem, however, as I said in chapter 6, that these are not normal times and sometimes counselling is their only resort if they are to find someone to listen to their distress and attempt to understand their disturbance. The psychotherapists and counsellors who work in the project are very aware that this form of intimacy with strangers is an unusual situation for many of these clients and try to be as sensitive and respectful as possible to this. We feel that it is a privilege to be trusted and we do not take it for granted (see remarks made by the therapists below). Often it takes time to build up trust and that is one reason why we have set no time limit to the number of sessions offered.

Usually these clients have suffered much more severe trauma than those that are native to this country. We are glad of the supervision as it helps us bear the painful nature of the work. We understand the client's need to speak of these memories gradually and in their own time. We understand the anger that frequently accompanies these revelations.

Those who work in the project report in supervision that clients seem to value the work but also that it is significant, though painful, for themselves. To illustrate the feeling among the therapist who undertake the work, here are examples from the survey I mentioned above:

'Working with Asylum Seekers and Refugees feels like a privilege. My normal work is with English speaking British clients with problems stemming from childhood. The unspeakable horrors and unbearable traumas that I am becoming witness to, as a client begins to trust me enough to share, are mainly from the atrocities perpetrated by the politically powerful onto innocent adults. My work is just a drop in the ocean of helping human misery, but it helps me to feel a part of a tide of healing to counteract the violence and inhumanity of war. My experience is that every single client is incredibly grateful, even when they are in the depths of unbearable depression and unable to imagine any improvement in their state of mind.'

'For one client I am currently seeing, the contact he has with me and the interpreter is the only contact he has all week, apart from when he goes to pray, because he is the sole occupant in the house provided by the Home Office, he speaks no English, is unable to read or write, and is too depressed to attend classes. So as part of the therapy, the interpreter and I are providing a lifeline of human communication. For the little I am able to give him, my client always wishes me prayers of good health and happiness for the rest of my life.'

'It is near impossible to appreciate the level of suffering of our clients, many of whom have lost their country, family members have been lost or killed, added to which their physical and mental health is in bad shape because of whatever abuse they have experienced and/or witnessed. I personally feel very grateful that we have the funding to provide this absolutely essential service.'

'I find the work hugely satisfying and am constantly being surprised by on the one hand the awfulness of what humans can do to each other and on the other the ability of some people to survive and retain their humanity.
I am certain that clients benefit. I have seen one who was feeling suicidal who after a few weeks was able to take up a work placement. Several have said they really appreciate being listened to and treated as if they matter. 1 client had been here long enough to get a job but collapsed into a depression after he heard his father had died and lost his job due to absenteeism. He only needed

4 sessions to have his story witnessed and his grief seen. He then stopped coming as he had found another job.'

'The work is very rewarding and necessary. People have had all kinds of terrible experiences and appreciate a safe place where they can talk about this and any other matters. I find that it gives me a little bit of an insight into other cultures and I am full of admiration for the people I see and how they are coping with what has happened (and continues to happen) to them.'

'I have one client who is 45, has his papers and is waiting for his family to join him. Works really hard, always punctual and sensitive though he has been horribly tortured. My other client is "18" though her lawyer suspects she may be much younger. Raped, brutalised, and has just been refused permission to stay! She finds it very hard to manage anything. Badly traumatised and has the most beautiful smile. I have to work very hard to see her. I ring her every week to remind her and her English is nonexistent. No Schooling in Somalia. She has to attend endless meetings in Croydon to see officials. I love the work but it does take a lot of time.'

Survey made in January 2004

Von Britzke found that interventions in therapeutic communities were most effective where the staff's own sense of involvement and enjoyment in the work was most intensely present (Von Britzke 2005). Crucially, she found that clients most valued the therapeutic groups which the staff most enjoyed. I wonder if the personal commitment felt by those working within our scheme is a significant factor in the effectiveness of the work with clients and is a contributory factor to the success of this venture. If this is the case it may be that there is an interaction between the intense need of the clients in extremis and the commitment of the therapists in response to this need that brings a sense of satisfaction in the work to all those involved.

Reflections on the Work to improve the Cultural Diversity of BCPC

When I started the work of trying to improve the diversity of our BCPC community I thought that we were likely to have a diverse client group if we had a more diverse staff, student and graduate group. However we have found, through the feedback we have had from community organisations, that the cost of our courses, which are lengthy and not subsidised, and the evident lack of diversity amongst our students and staff make BCPC seem not immediately welcoming. It is clearly a 'white' organisation, not only because its members are not diverse but because of its prevailing culture in which the awareness of its being rooted in 'whiteness' is not strongly obvious. For instance, when discussing child development on courses, western methods are discussed quite exclusively, in spite of our attempts to hold cultural assumptions in mind. We have started to look more widely at different cultural approaches to child rearing on the Introductory Course.

Although the slow tempo of our progress is discouraging it is evident to me that our policies are gradually bearing fruit. On the day I write this, for example, I received an application for a grant from our scholarship fund from an Asian woman who works with people who have been harassed for their non-white appearance.

However the work with asylum seekers has given us an opportunity to experience a much more diverse client group so that the overall client profile of BCPC has revolutionised over night. I am hoping that there might be a knock-on effect in the other direction, ie, towards more students and staff from 'ethic minorities', especially as this work gives us an *entrée* to immigrant and refugee groups within Bristol and some credibility with them. Very recently Ounkar Kaur, the new Indian staff member mentioned above, told me that our work with asylum seekers and refugees captured her interest in BCPC. In an email correspondence she said

> ‘You are correct in saying that I have been drawn to BCPC due to their work with people from minority groups, particularly as I am a minority myself. I have felt inspired and it is encouraging when organisations like BCPC make the commitment they have with the work with asylum seekers.’
>
> *August 2005*

and went on to say

> ‘all the conversations that have taken place with Tony, Whiz , yourself and I and the students have been very beneficial. I agree with you when you conclude that the small increase in the diversity of the student body and the developing curriculum are all signs that some progress has been made.’
>
> *August 2005*

It seems that there is some indication that my optimism is justified. So far our project has been very well received in the statutory and voluntary sector in Bristol. I have been asked to talk about our work at various meetings of community organisations and conferences.

Conclusion

Reflecting now on my work to improve the diversity of BCPC as an organisation, I can see how my understanding has changed. This change encompasses both what it means to be a diverse organisation and an understanding of how to achieve diversity. This shift in my understanding and practice has occurred in two ways:

1. through my dialogic engagement with cycles of action and reflection in my work within the organisation and
2. my general understanding of ‘whiteness’, gained in my inquiry process, has been brought to bear on my work within the organsisation.

A growing sense of my own' whiteness', and in particular my growing understanding that whiteness and racism are intersubjectively constituted and endemically held within 'white' culture has helped me to see and understand the 'whiteness' of BCPC.

As I showed in chapter 6 (see page 199), I became interested in the lack of diversity in psychotherapy organisations, and BCPC in particular, when I first joined the Intercultural Committee of the U. K. Council for Psychotherapy, UKCP [4], in 1996. In order to test the validity of my two statements above I returned to questions that I raised at the time. My responses to these questions give some idea of how far my understanding and my organisational practice have developed since then. My questions were as follows:

1. Can the psychotherapy profession, and BCPC in particular, become less homogeneous?
2. Is psychotherapy theory, and in particular that of BCPC, culturally specific to white, western society and therefore alienating to those who are 'black' and non-western?
3. How can I work towards helping the profession, and BCPC in particular, become more representative of our multicultural modern-day Britain?

In responding to these questions I will consider ways in which BCPC has changed or not changed and the factors which encouraged these changes, as well as making recommendations for the psychotherapy profession as a whole. Where changes have not been made I explore why this might be and make some suggestions about how changes might be made in the future.

[4] UKCP is a national umbrella body which accredits its organisational members and provides a register of psychotherapists. It is working towards statutory registration.

As regards the *first question*, from my present perspective, the homogenous nature of the field of psychotherapy seems very hard to tackle effectively. However, I feel strengthened in my view, through my work with asylum seekers and refugees, that dialogic, intersubjective psychotherapy does have a place in providing a service to people in many different cultures and across cultures. I have found, nevertheless, that BCPC as an institution, finds it difficult to change *its* culture sufficiently to make a significant contribution to the profession as a whole becoming more inclusive.

I had been aware of this, not just as someone who remonstrates with others to change but as someone who is right there within organisations and therefore part of the problem. This became apparent to me when I was a member of the BCPC equal opportunities committee and through subsequent reflections. When I say that I am part of the problem I am not saying that I am not doing my best. What I can see is that I have not yet taken the steps that are needed to really ensure inclusivity. Of course it would take more than just my input. At the same time I cannot see the problem as something just 'out there'. I cannot say 'if only others would…….'

I have found, through several cycles of action and reflection, that the most important thing we need to do is to make real links with different communities and have real dialogue with them (Buber 1965; Habermas 1984; Bohm 1996). This is tiring and uphill work, not funded and not easy. It takes us away from our known and comfortable world. But this needs to be done if we are to make any headway. As was pointed out by black community organisations, training needs to be cheaper and this can only really be achieved if it is publicly funded. This is very unlikely to happen soon, if at all, in the present political climate, and psychotherapy is not even

widely recognised as important within the National Health Service (Scott 2004).

The *second question,* 'Is psychotherapy theory, and in particular that of BCPC, culturally specific to white, western society and therefore alienating to those of who are 'black' and non-western?' is one I feel more positive about if a dialogic, intersubjective approach is used. Since starting this work I have had many more clients who are not part of western society who say they are benefiting, and seem to me to be benefiting, by the work (see previous chapter). An approach that does not use western values as a base line is essential if this is to be undertaken and further developed, however. Remaining constantly open to dialogue is important, particularly while 'white' people remain dominant globally.

The *third question* asks 'How can I work towards helping the profession, and BCPC in particular, become more representative of our multicultural modern-day Britain?' This question is key. The answer to it is important in considering whether or not my inquiry has enduring worth in the field beyond my own personal learning. Reflecting on this now I feel sure that my inquiry has indeed given me important new insights. I have come to the conclusion that, if white people within the psychotherapy profession are to ensure that it becomes more diverse, the following must be undertaken:

- A *conscious and sustained* effort to forge links with minority and immigrant groups and agencies that work with them. The Project for work with asylum seekers and refugees has been successful in large part because of making these links.
- The discovery of the *real* needs by making these links. Through our dialogues with these organisations, we have better understood the need for free or cheap and conveniently situated psychotherapy, for example.

- Work towards the public funding of psychotherapy training. Only in this way is training likely to be affordably priced.
- Ensure that training is culturally sensitive and that this sensitivity is evident in every aspect of theory and practice. We have found, through work with black staff and students, that this sensitivity needs to be in place if psychotherapy organisations are not to feel alien to black people
- Give up the notion that the white, western view is the base line from which others deviate.
- Really want to do this for the richness it brings to us personally and as a small contribution to a more peaceful world.

These guidelines arise from my inquiry and are important, but what seems to me to be most important is the constant non-defensive inquiring attitude and a real desire to want to make changes. When I consider the dilemma of whether the equal opportunities committee should be at the centre or the margins to be most effective in promoting organisational change towards greater diversity, I now hear this as a polarised choice. Maybe it could be in both places, or neither place, or one place at one time and one at another. Maybe there is no right place. Certainly no perfect place.

So what is important when considering the question of how to ensure that the whiteness of the psychotherapy profession is acknowledged and greater diversity really embraced? In my view it is the engagement, the inquiry and the dialogue and the genuine desire to make a difference. Polarised positions which reflect dualistic thinking are taken up because there is a fantasy that it is possible to 'get it right' and the answer is clear and simple. My experience is that this is not the case. From time to time a resting place is reached. We might think that we have found a solution but it only works for a little while before fresh challenges arise. Though this could feel wearing to me, it is also exciting; it is life, it is lively and alive. I am

inspired by the poem, *Mental Fight* that Ben Okri (1999) wrote for the millenium in which he says:

Only free people can make a free world.
Infect the world with your light.
Help fulfill the golden prophecies
Press forward the human genius.
Our future is greater than our past.
We are better than that.
We are greater than our despair.
The negative aspects of humanity
Are not the most real and authentic;
The most authentic thing about us
Is our capacity to create, to overcome,
To endure, to transform, to love,
And to be greater than our suffering.
We are best defined by the mystery
That we are still here, and can still rise
Upwards, still create better civilisations,
That we can face our raw realities,
And that we will survive
The greater despair
That the greater future might bring.

From *Mental Fight* by Ben Okri