Let’s talk about politics:

Therapists’ accounts of the relationship between p/Politics and therapy

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Introduction

• Context: social justice research in counselling and psychology
• p/Politics and therapy
• Therapists’ accounts of p/Politics and therapy
• Implications and conclusions
Context: ‘Social Justice’

• “…social justice is both a goal of action and the process of action itself, which involves an emphasis on equity or equality for individuals in society in terms of access to a number of different resources and opportunities, the right to self-determination or autonomy and participation in decision-making, freedom from oppression, and a balancing of power across society.” (Cutts, 2013, pp. 9–10)

• The ‘social justice agenda’ in counselling and applied psychology
Social justice literature in counselling and psychology

1. ‘Social justice’ specific: e.g. in counselling psychology, educational and school psychology (e.g. Winter & Hanley, 2015; Schulze et al., 2019; Jenkins et al., 2018)

2. Embedded in or connected to ideas of ‘social justice’ e.g. with minoritised groups, or connected with social policy etc. (e.g. Washington, 2018; Nadal et al., 2012; Winter et al., 2016)

3. Conceptual or review work on ‘social justice’ training or practice (e.g. Goodman et al., 2004; Cutts, 2013)
“Social justice’ in counselling and psychotherapy does not have to be something complicated or obtuse. Simply put, it is an acknowledgment that the work we do occurs in a socio-political context which it cannot be easily disconnected from (and therefore that things like power, discrimination and oppression are important) and that this work can have political implications. Social justice work then becomes about remembering and articulating these values in our practice” (Winter, 2019, p.180)
Politics and social justice

• Ideas within definitions of social justice: equality, equity, fairness etc. are all values which are structured through political systems

• Warning from Milton & Legg (2000) – systemic focus can lose the focus on politics

• What is politics?
The personal is political

‘I believe at this point, and maybe for a long time to come, that these analytical sessions are a form of political action. I do not go to these sessions because I need or want to talk about my “personal problems”…One of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution. I went, and I continue to go to these meetings because I have gotten a political understanding which all my reading, all my “political discussions,” all my “political action,” all my four-odd years in the movement never gave me’ (Hanisch, 1969, emphasis added)
p/Politics

• Big P Politics
Electoral, governmental, ideological, party politics

• Small p politics
“...the ways in which every-day decision-making by individuals and communities can gradually, episodically, change dominant hegemonic norms and understandings, providing new opportunities for social change” (Hankins, 2017, p.503).
The personal is p/Political

“If we ignore the political work and relationships in and around schools, we are doing young people and the staff working with them a significant disservice, and we obscure the real life practice in education. Emotional well-being and education are not only impacted by the Political, they themselves are political.” (Winter et al., 2020, emphasis added)
Politics and therapy

- Politics and mental health/therapy are inseparable (Strawbridge, 2000; Prilleltensky, 2008)
- Therapy as a political activity and psychologists should take an ‘overtly political stance’ (Rahim & Cooke, 2020, p.1)
- Areas for consideration when thinking about the intersection between politics and therapy (e.g. Sanders, 2006; Totton, 2000)
- Politically sensitive psychotherapy (e.g. Avissar, 2016)
Politics and therapy

But:

‘...politically motivated therapists are probably not explicitly bringing their agenda into their work with vulnerable clients, but there is an unrecognised issue here that should be confronted’ (Feltham, 2018, emphasis added)
p/Politics and therapy: the research

- Majority of psychologists have talked about Politics with clients (87%, Solomonov & Barber, 2019)
- ‘Large minority’ viewed politics as relevant to therapy, majority view as distinct from each other (Avissar, 2009)

What about how therapists’ experience this (p/Politics) in their work?
How do therapists understand and experience p/Politics in their work?

• 32 therapists (applied psychologists, counsellors & psychotherapists)
• Online survey, followed by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2020)

Winter (2021)
Swimming against the tide: working against p/Politics in therapy

“Many of my non private client’s issues come from poverty, [and] are worsened by austerity. It's hard to encourage self-worth when their environment treats them like rubbish.”
Therapeutic work as p/Political

“There is a power relationship between therapist and client with the therapist more powerful. Identity, cultural and economic issues (race, gender, sexuality, class) permeate and shape the therapeutic relationship”
“We have to park our impressions of politics at the door”

“If a therapist can't be alongside their client, due to incompatible politics, it can cause rupture or weakening of the relationship”
“We have to park our impressions of politics at the door”

“Twice in three years a client had raised politics. I was very uncomfortable in case we disagreed”

“We have to park our own impressions of politics at the door and concentrate on the clients’ experience…”
Professional ethics and p/Politics: striking a balance

“I find politics very difficult to deal with in practice. I am often torn between respecting the individual rights and beliefs of the client with what I can perceive as the danger of some kinds of politics for the wellbeing of people in our society”
Professional ethics and p/Politics: striking a balance

“…We have to face these things and be able to hold all of them for our clients - we are holding the political. It is scary and a burden, and an ethical requirement”
“A culture of silence”: lack of support and training

“Psychology has traditionally ignored politics. There is culture of silence, sense of trepidation in talking about these issues. Nutshell, it's a lonely process.”

“The silence is suffocating, because of course, it impacts on our work.”
Conclusions

For some practitioners:

• Therapeutic work is political and influenced by the p/Political
• Therapeutic training did not equip them to know how to work with p/Politics in their roles
• There is a feeling of being alone and unsupported
• There is a particular difficulty around Politics explicitly entering into therapeutic discussions
Questions

• If therapy is political – can therapeutic practice be a form of ‘quiet activism’ (Winter et al., 2020), or does it perpetuate oppressive systems?

• Is ethical practice political? Is political practice ethical? See Hailes et al. (2021) ethical guidelines for social justice
Implications

- Replace ‘diversity and difference’ in training
- Research and scholarship to actively unpick ‘social justice’, and consider p/Politics
- Reflexive practice & p/Politics
- Engage with peer networks
- Support from membership bodies
References

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