

Lessons from Just Therapy

I recently attended a workshop, *Private Conversations, Public Issues - Therapy and Social Justice*, which focused on some of the many ways the Family Centre in New Zealand has found justice through their work and improved the lives of thousands of people across New Zealand and the world. The Family Centre bases their work around the practice of 'Just Therapy' which they have developed throughout the life of the centre which was initially established in 1979. The work of the Family Centre has been internationally recognised and acclaimed, and I think there are some useful and simple lessons to be learned for anyone working with people who face injustice in their lives.

The best way of introducing Just Therapy is through a quick historical introduction - much like the Just Therapy team themselves do. Early on the team of family therapists noticed that the majority of people they worked with had been pushed into their problems by external factors they had no control over: for example if you are living on the poverty line with a large family the washing machine breaking down may be the last straw, and can lead to a variety of other presenting problems - even including marital breakdown and domestic violence.

The team felt that although people were usually happier after their therapy had concluded, they were simply returning to the same difficult situations as before - experiencing poverty, racial harassment, age and gender discrimination, and often difficulty accessing services. Their efforts at developing a more holistic and sustainable approach to addressing their client's problems were the first move towards developing the Just Therapy approach, where therapeutic practice is always closely allied with a search for justice.

One of the first things they did was to employ two community development workers, one from the Maori people and one from the Pacific Island community. The community development work that was carried out was as exceptional as the therapeutic work, and the Family Centre has been at the forefront of work to safeguard the autochthonous peoples' rights and raise them out of poverty for nearly 25 years.

There was a crucial interplay between the therapists and the community development workers, who both influenced each other's work and then developed more overlapping job roles so now all the staff combine different elements of the centre's work in their practice.

One of the practical community development and therapeutic methods that developed out of this is the reef analysis. Initially inspired by the experience of sitting on the beach looking at the reef and wondering how to work more productively with the local people who weren't engaging. The image of the reef, a common reference point for many Pacific Island people and others, provided a tool to elicit discussion and problem solving that has been used successfully in many different contexts. This use of images, or metaphors as the team knows them, has extended to all the therapeutic practice at the Family Centre and is another key element of Just Therapy - respecting clients by communicating with them in terms they can understand and find useful.

The final part of the practical definition of Just Therapy as I understood it comes from the meaning of 'just' as 'simply' or simple: Just Therapy is simple therapy. This does not detract in any way from the power of the technique, but does recognise that from a community perspective all the years of training that therapists in the Western tradition go through doesn't necessarily lead to the most beneficial results in therapy. The training can blind the therapist to some simple and practical solutions, and it can lead therapists into adopting objective and non-interventionist stances.

Simple therapy recognises that therapeutic work has been practised in communities for millennia before it became scientifically defined in the last century, and all sorts of people can still be recognised as doing therapeutic work today. This approach empowers many more people to reflect on the part therapy or therapeutic aims or practices can have in their own life or work, and extends the benefits of therapy to many more people (although of course this doesn't mean that just anyone can start practising as a therapist).

To summarise, Just Therapy means:

- taking account of people's wider social situation during therapy and using lessons from therapy to campaign for social justice
- respecting people by using language and approaches they understand, and combining therapy with community development approaches
- opening up simple therapy as a practice of life

This is just a very brief exploration of a few of the many insights offered by the Just Therapy Team at this two-day workshop. There are many more lessons from the Family Centre's 25 years of working to combat the results of poverty and ethnic and gendered discrimination. Their model of an accountability structure to ensure the minority groups working at the Family Centre are properly heard and respected, including women as well the Maori and Pacific Island groups, is also well worth looking into.

At the end of the workshop we were asked to reflect on how we were going to use some of the lessons we learned in our own work. I felt there was a lot of crossover with what I am already trying to do in supporting more and better advocacy work to be carried out in Wakefield District, and it is very helpful to see successful models of this working already. There are also many elements of their work that were new and inspiring for me. I hope to have an ongoing engagement with the work the Family Centre has developed and I will continually find ways to spread the word and offer other people the opportunity to be inspired by the Just Therapy approach. Please feel free to contact me if you would like to discuss any issues in more detail or get further information.

For more information there is an excellent book: *Just Therapy - A Journey*, by Charles Waldegrave, Kiwi Tamasese, Flora Tuhaka and Wahiri Campbell, published by Dulwich Centre Publications, Adelaide.

Henry Fisher
Advocacy Project Coordinator
T: 01924 306875 E: henry@advocacyaction.org.uk