Editorial

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Editorial

This editorial is written a week after a UK election that followed the trend in Western political life towards populism and away from a collective approach to society – across and within nation states. In an effort to prepare to write, following these events, I looked back through the Journal of Child Psychotherapy, over the years, to see how other such major political events were reflected in JCP articles, papers and reviews, and in the editorials. What comes through clearly is that the work that clinicians are and have been doing, both within the United Kingdom and internationally, reflects constantly, but only indirectly, the social, political and cultural realities of the environments in which our work has taken place: the settings, the presenting issues, the models of treatment and the training. With a very few exceptions, the Journal has on the whole not included an explicit comment on the socio-political climate in which we and our patients live, feel and work.

Now, with an increased focus within the child psychotherapy community on diversity and equalities, we are more explicitly learning how to work with wider systemic influences, and how to think about our role within them. That knowledge and the understanding of what it means in the consulting room, in the team and in the teaching environment, are likely to become more important and of greater value to our patients and students, at a time when wider social inequalities may become more stark.

As part of the ACP’s aim to develop our thinking in relation to diversity, this edition was originally designed as a ‘special issue’, with a focus on aspects of difference and sameness and how they are worked with by child and adolescent psychotherapists. When relatively few articles came in following the call for papers, there was an opportunity to think about what this meant. In the process, we questioned our own decision to put this crucial aspect of practice into a ‘special issue’, with the risk that ‘diversity’ would then be seen as having been attended to, a box ticked, rather than an ongoing and necessary maintained focus. We need this maintained focus on diversity and inequality, if we are to do our patients justice. We also need to maintain pace with other disciplines that have built a significant literature in this aspect of work (for example, systemic family psychotherapists and social workers). The need for every JCP edition to include articles that help us undertake a robust and open exploration of our understanding of working with difference seems even more important in the light of recent political events, where assumptions and beliefs about race and class have arguably played such a significant role. There is a pressing need for us to be interested not just in understanding more about the perspectives of patients from whom we are different, but more importantly to be prepared to examine our own attitudes, biases, and privileges in relation to our patients.
We hope in this edition of the Journal to provide some food for thought, in both familiar and less familiar areas of exploration. The papers fall into three broad groups: those aiming to include a discussion of culture and diversity; those where the wider social environment is part of the area of clinical work under consideration; and those focusing on a specific area of clinical thinking, via a single case study, exploring the significance of early psychic experience and the impact and quality of therapeutic contact in this context.

We start with the papers that explicitly address both the internal landscape traversed and understood in the clinical encounter, and the cultural realities for both patient and therapist. In two papers discussing the complex interaction between harm faced from external sources, and from within the self, Coretta Ogbuagu and Sean Junor-Sheppard offer the opportunity for us to closely examine the impact of their patients’ experiences, as they are brought to bear within the therapeutic relationship.

Ogbuagu’s paper, first presented at the 2018 ACP Conference (‘Relating to the other’), focuses on parent-infant work with a young black British mother, while Junor-Shepherd’s paper looks at his work with a young Muslim adolescent girl, the subject of his doctoral thesis. Both papers include, in different ways, an exploration of the social environment for both patient and therapist. In both cases, the realities and phantasies about the nature of the therapeutic relationship, within which tensions around power and knowledge are embedded, are made explicit in a way that deepens our understanding of the work’s dynamics.

Maria Papadima’s paper takes us from the intimacy of a specific clinical relationship, where the impact of social realities is a key part of the experience, to a consideration of the wider role that shared social experience plays in the current prevalence of self-harm. Exploring the concepts of hysteria and ‘social contagion’ from both a psychoanalytic and a psychosocial perspective in relation to adolescent self-harm, she draws together the clinical understanding of the internal processes at work for young people who cause harm to their bodies, and the cultural forces that influence how distress is experienced and communicated within the social sphere for young people. Making a similar but less explicit link between the family as encountered in the consulting room and the wider cultural environment, Monica Lanyado explores the vital role of the grandparent in the lives of many children and young people, as seen in our clinical work.

Graham Shulman’s paper, first presented at the 2019 ACP Conference (‘Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow’), explores the significance of ‘duration’ in the development of psychic functioning, drawing on his clinical experience of work with a pre-latency child seen within a service for Looked After Children. Shulman eloquently shows the impact of the ways external experience intersects with the most fundamental internal capacity to connect with a present object. He provides moving detail from the clinical relationship and its role in supporting the development of the child’s capacity to make use of such an object.

Shulman’s paper, with its dedicated focus on a particular aspect of psychic functioning, forms a helpful link to the final two papers, both of which focus on work with children on the autism spectrum. These papers come from different parts of the international community. May Nilsson’s paper describes the process of simultaneous therapy with a child and their parents, i.e. work in parallel undertaken by the same clinician. She describes the therapist as a ‘hub’ in a complex network of
relationships, and uses a case study to bring the Swedish context and setting alive, and to show the model at work. Lida Anagnostaki and Maria Tselika, part of the Greek community of child psychotherapists, also focus on work not just with a child, but with the family struggling with the experience and impact of having an autistic child. They offer a fascinating account of a model of work within a setting which is itself struggling with uncertainties and change.

It is worth noting that in this edition, several of the authors of the clinical papers include a specific comment on the experience of successfully seeking consent, which we hope will continue to encourage others to feel that writing for publication and protecting the privacy of our patients are not mutually exclusive.

The remaining contributions to this edition also maintain some focus on the questions of how we understand and work with sameness and difference. Sarah Peter, editor of the Research Digest, provides an introductory commentary to a fascinating selection of abstracts looking at important issues, drawn from a range of journals within and outside the psychoanalytic sphere. These examples of current research are hugely helpful for those of us who are keen to understand the question of diversity from a range of perspectives. The included abstracts range from subjects such as mental health issues for Somali youth in the USA, to an exploration of ‘consensual nonmonogamy’ through the eyes of psychotherapists in Poland; they all provide considerable food for thought, in light of our own relatively reduced literature in this area.

The first of our Book Reviews, by Geraldine Crehan, celebrates the publication of a key new text in the psychoanalytic literature, which provides an invaluable and nuanced exploration of a highly contested field with a complicated and painful history and present, for the psychoanalytic community. ‘Sexuality and gender now: Moving beyond heteronormativity’ (Eds. Leezah Hertzmann and Juliet Newbiggin) draws together a range of authors ready to explore with a fresh and courageous outlook the meaning of human sexuality and experience of gender. This review is a welcome addition to what we hope will be an ongoing focus on our attitudes and understanding of sameness and difference across aspects of experience.

Different approaches within the professional community are reflected in two of the other Book Reviews, where a specific theoretical orientation in relation to an aspect of work is an organising principle. Deirdre Dowling reviews Ann Horne’s ‘On children who privilege the body: Reflections of an independent psychotherapist (Independent psychoanalytic approaches with children and adolescents series)’, while Dowling’s own book ‘An independent practitioner’s introduction to child and adolescent psychotherapy: playing with ideas’ is reviewed by Rachel Acheson.

Finally, Sarah Sutton’s review of Graham Music’s ‘Nurturing children: From trauma to growth using attachment theory, psychoanalysis and neurobiology’ richly draws together these key threads, and the ways in which our thinking is developed through integrating different approaches.

We hope that you will find this edition interesting and that it will inspire more examination of our own identities as clinicians; our own cultures, privileges or privileged areas of knowledge and experience, and our weaknesses or relative areas of disadvantage, all of which influence the ways we work with others.

To end, I want to comment on two pieces of correspondence I found in the search through the Journal, in relation to political life. They are from 1977 and 1979, written
by Elizabeth Holder and James McKeith, respectively. The first was a letter to the editor (and the readership) about the need to make a public statement regarding the use of psychiatric treatment (and psychiatric professionals) in perpetuating political abuses in the Soviet Union. The second (by McKeith) referenced Holder’s letter, making a similar appeal for the Journal to take a stand on a pressing political issue at the time. His letter focussed on a WHO report about the oppressive impact of apartheid on mental health services in South Africa, and he asked the Journal to forward his letter to the relevant political figure in South Africa. This was done, and the politician’s reply was also included in the Journal, providing a clear picture of the situation, protest, and response. Both Holder and McKeith made a plea for the readership, and the Journal, to be ready to speak out, setting aside neutrality. These were, of course, extreme political environments – and our professional body, the ACP, is already active politically and will no doubt continue to be, over the next difficult period. But perhaps there is now more of a need than ever for each of us as individuals to be ready to look at our own contributions to the dynamics of the therapy relationship as part of a wider system, as well as always keeping in mind the perspective of those who come to us in need of help.

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