Considering social justice values and practice in UK counselling psychology

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Overview

• Background and literature

• Methodology

• Findings
  – Understandings of social justice
  – Fit between social justice and counselling psychology
  – Social justice action

• Conclusions and implications
Background and literature

• Social justice
  – “the idea that society gives individuals and groups fair treatment and an equal share of benefits, resources, and opportunities” (Chung & Bemak, 2012, p. 26)

• Research suggests individuals find it difficult to define
  (Olsen et al., 2013; Singh et al., 2010; Todd & Rufa, 2012)

• Equity, access, participation and harmony
  (Crethar & Winterowd, 2012)

• ‘Social justice agenda’ in US counselling psychology

• Counselling psychology ‘ideally placed’ to consider social justice (Vera & Speight, 2003)
Background and literature

• How do counselling psychologists act on social justice values?

• Goodman et al. (2004):
  – Ongoing self-examination
  – Sharing power
  – Giving voice
  – Facilitating consciousness raising
  – Building on strengths
  – Leaving clients with the tools for social change
Background and literature

- Have knowledge about the impact of oppression and inequalities
- Participate in ongoing critical reflection
- Maintain an ongoing awareness of your own power or privilege
- Question, challenge, and intervene
- Possess knowledge about indigenous models of health
- Cultivate an ongoing awareness of the types of social injustices
- Conceptualise, implement and evaluate comprehensive preventative and remedial mental health intervention programmes which are aimed at addressing the needs of marginalized populations
- Collaborate with community organizations in partnership, and provide culturally relevant services to identified groups
- Develop system intervention and advocacy skills to promote social change processes.

Constantine et al., (2007)
Methodology

• Research question:
  – What can we learn about the understanding and place of social justice in UK counselling psychology from members of the profession who have at least a moderate interest in and commitment to social justice?

• Interviews explored:
  – Understandings of social justice
  – How they understood counselling psychology and social justice to relate (if at all)
  – Thoughts about or experience of social justice action

• Data analysed using tools from the grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Rennie et al., 1988)
# Findings

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Over to you…

In small groups consider the questions below, pick one person to feed back and we will discuss:

How do you understand social justice?
What do you think are the key elements?
Understandings

Challenge to define

– Lack of familiarity: not mentioned on training
– Use a different term e.g. ‘systemic’

Important elements

– Autonomy and agency
– Empowering disadvantaged or oppressed groups
– Issues of power
– Political concept and action
– Personal concept
Over to you…

In small groups consider the following question, pick one person to feed back and we will discuss:

How, if at all, do you see the ideas of social justice as being relevant to counselling psychology?
Fit

“I mean I think it’s integral really, I mean I think a lot of the distress and mental health problems and the increase in mental health problems are related to social justice [...] so I yeah, I kind of think it’s, it should be at the forefront of counselling psychology…if we don’t address these issues we’re almost just kind of colluding with the status quo” (P4)

• Philosophy of profession fitting with counselling psychology

• But: perception of a lack of interest in social justice in the wider counselling psychology profession

• Not perceived by participants to be a large part of the identity of counselling psychology
Over to you…

In small groups consider the following question, pick one person to feed back and we will discuss:

How might counselling psychologists act on their social justice values?
Ways of acting

“I guess you’ve gotta be real about it you know. And if you really believe in it then you’ve got to be actively out there on the streets in some way” (P1)

Attitude

“I think my attitude towards people, and not just in a kind of political or ideological sense, but how I talk about my clients, how I talk to my clients, how I talk to other people, the kind of person I am is where it starts for me.” (P6)

Specific actions

• Personal and/or professional
• Individual and wider level
A rhetoric-action gap?

“If you look at the handbook of counselling psychology, there’s, from memory I could be wrong about this, there’s one chapter on community psychology which looks at broader issues but where’s the rest? [...] So that would lead me to think unless everyone’s covert guerrilla like social justice practitioners then I, I don’t know where it is.” (P6)

“So I read things about you know oh there’s counselling psychologists we place a lot of emphasis on context and I think yeah, I’m sure we do, but where’s the evidence for that?” (P3)
Issues with action

• Social justice work is a challenge for counselling psychologists:
  – “I understand why, because with the context that I work in, which is medically
dominated, we have to be taken seriously, and there’s a certain discourse that
you have to use to be taken seriously.” (P3)

• Problems with theoretical models we are trained in

• Time issues:
  – “It’s almost like…you’re entering into another discipline, the social
psychology, which with the I suppose especially for counselling psychologists
who are training already with the enormity of what we are taking on I think
sometimes that might feel like quite a lot” (P4)
Conclusions

• At least some counselling psychologists are engaging in social justice both in their personal and professional lives
• Unsure of presence of social justice values in the wider profession, or whether or not it is part of the identity of the profession in the UK (training implications)
• There are issues and barriers which counselling psychologists face when trying to engage in social justice action
References


References continued…


