Power differences and perceptions of power

Based on Counsellor /Client role differences
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Podcast Transcript

Like all human life, counselling takes place within a framework of sameness and difference, however very few human relationships are neutral.

Consider your own life, how many relationships do you have with others that has power imbalance in favour of you or them?

There are a number of areas in which therapists have the power balance tipped in their favour.

The first example is that most counselling takes place at a venue and time which suits the therapist or the organisation they work for.

Some organisations and therapists try to be as flexible as possible, in offering appointments, but the reality remains that most clients have to alter their routine to access therapy, not the other way around.

Therapists train in a modality of therapy which informs them of how in theory a client may have become distressed, this information informs the therapists interventions with the client which for the most part are not totally transparent unless the client has a working knowledge of the modality.

Furthermore therapists get to know quite a bit about their clients lives while clients learn less about the personal life of the therapist.

Some role differences are client ‘centric’ in that they may develop a fantasy which colludes with personal disempowerment, for example;

Clients come from a position of asking for help, at the point of accessing therapy, this may lead some clients in to feelings of shame, because they believe that they should be able to ‘sort themselves out’.

Seeing the therapist as an “expert”, a client may perceive that they are handing themselves to the therapist to be ‘repaired’ or ‘fixed’,
Some clients enter therapy with a history of being de-powered due to experiences in childhood, relationships or employment structures.

Therapists need to be aware that for these clients, falling in to a subservient role in the face of perceived power may be a default position.

Others may feel de-powered to due to societal ‘rankings’ as discussed by Nick Totton in an article that appeared in the magazine Therapy Today in September 2009. entitled ‘Power in the therapy room’. (Therapy Today September 2009, page 16)

Totton describes the indicators of rank as being;

‘Gender, ethnicity, class, age, income, sexuality, ablebodiedness’

Explaining that:

‘Difference in rank inflicts many of the emotional wounds which people bring to therapy, and which can also be re-enacted and reinforced in the therapeutic relationship’.

The message is clear; therapists must challenge their preconceptions before their preconceptions challenge them.

Hopefully this happens during training; in supervision and the therapist own therapy, however make no mistake, this is a work in progress, a therapist who does not consider and actively engage with power differences, be it institutional or in the clients perception will not be contributing fully to a transformational alliance.

Reference