Mapping the boundaries of Psychotherapy: Can of Worms or Moral Endeavour?

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AAGP Conference Sydney April 2016

Tim presented the PhD research he is undertaking into the profession of psychotherapy. In it he is asking why it is that so few seem to understand what psychotherapy is, why all, including the profession itself, are confused about its nature, science or craft, and how, if at all, it is linked with psychology and psychiatry and finally, if it is a profession, why it doesn’t behave like most professions do, carving out a jurisdiction.

He took the introduction of the Better Access Initiative as the crystallizing moment that both changed the ecology of the psycho-professions as well as putting into bas relief the conundrums and contradictions that have always existed. In particular he drew attention to the moral dilemmas that many (government, practitioners and clients) now face in providing psychotherapy under the aegis of the BAI, all within a practice, that of psychotherapy, that sees itself as undertaking a ‘moral endeavor’.

His research is looking at psychotherapy through the lens of Science and Technology Studies whose expertise is in looking askance at science but also, inevitably, expertise and professionalization. Psychotherapy shows little sign of being a science yet tries to position itself alongside the other two psycho-professions that attempt to prove they are scientific. What is the expertise of a psychotherapist and how is it different from anyone else who has a relationship with another? If it is so easy to fake being a doctor, and the, at least, 30,000 impostors in the US do very well at doctoring, then how much easier is it to fake being a psychotherapist? There are a number of behaviours that mark out professions. Psychotherapy undertakes some of them but doesn’t seem to attempt the aggressive boundary drawing and definition the others see as part of their ongoing creation.

Instead psychotherapy seems to almost be chameleon like as it tries to appear the same as psychology and psychiatry and grabs ill fitting concepts such as Evidence Based Practice, Randomized Controlled Trials, Mindfulness, Neurobiology, anything, seemingly, rather than saying what it actually does.

Whilst the research is at times provocative and depressing for a native researcher yet it has also provided him with a newfound love and courage for this profession and what it does and represents for society.