Just therapy: a social justice perspective

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When I was first asked to write an extended review of this collection of papers, I entertained some doubts as to whether I might be the best person to do it justice (pardon the pun). For one thing, I am neither social worker nor therapist (although, as it happens, my partner is a skilled therapist of many years experience). For another, the book appeared, from a distance, to be peculiarly rooted in the particular cultural and social context of Aotearoa/New Zealand about which I knew relatively little, having visited it only twice. The editors pressed me, especially as they wanted to incorporate a social justice perspective on the book; and I am glad they did. I may display my ignorance of some aspects of New Zealand life here, in which case I apologise. Nevertheless, I do so in the spirit of honest – if naïve enquiry – and in that spirit, ka nui te mihi ki a koutou. Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa.

It might help – but very briefly - to sketch out my views of social justice, a term which has become a common part of the political lexicon of my own country, the UK, in recent years. Rawls’ (1971) simple definition was that social justice meant fairness and was manifest in a society which was not oriented towards individual gain. His way of testing this was through the ‘veil of ignorance’ through which ‘no one knows his [sic] place in society, class position or social status … they know that their society is subject to the circumstances of justice and whatever this implies …’ People thus are moved to act without any sense of personal advantage and are driven by this concept of justice. He suggested that ‘all social values – liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the social bases of self-respect – are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any or all of these values is to everyone’s advantage’. Of course, governments do not act behind a veil of ignorance; indeed, the increased use of targeted policies by most governments which have a formal welfare system implies a deliberate attempt to pursue informed strategies, leaving aside the impact of the means by which those policies are pursued and the unintended consequences of policy. Nor, it became clear from reading this book, do the workers in the Just Therapy programme act from ignorance, although their approach is a million miles away from that of most governments.

There are those such as Raymond Plant (2000) who argue that social justice requires governments to work with the grain of the market; I disagree with this approach profoundly as the market is, in my view, the fundamental cause of much injustice, both social and economic, as both developed countries and transitional and developing economies are finding to their cost. The costs of full-blown marketisation in both the UK, under Thatcher, and New Zealand, under Rogernomics, as well as of structural adjustment in Third World countries¹ have been increasing divides in income and wealth, social dislocation and, for a while, within New Zealand, the highest rates of suicide within the OECD family of countries. My view of social justice, then, requires that government confronts the inequities of market systems. Until they do, much of the
work of social workers and therapists has consisted of picking up the casualties of the market and that represents a huge challenge for such workers who are concerned to make a more sustainable impact as a result of their interventions. And it is precisely that which marks out the ambitions of the Just Therapy approach.

The views of early commentators on rights and citizenship, such as Marshall (1950) with his taxonomy of political, civil and social rights, need to be enlarged to incorporate the dimensions of gender and culture. For minority ethnic groups, this means the right to be culturally different within a society which provides the same social, civil and political rights to all; that is, to be equal but different. Additionally, what most definitions of social justice fail to do is to highlight the role of those most disadvantaged by social injustice, as actors - rather than simply victims - in the search for social justice. The United Nations has, for example, pointed to the many ways, including organisational, informational and developmental ways, as well as the more familiar means, such as constitutional and legal, political and economic ways, in which participation by the disadvantaged themselves may promote social justice. My own additional emphasis would therefore be on the role of community development (Craig and Mayo 1995) as the means by which the excluded and the marginalised can act on their own behalves in this search.

In summary, then, my view of social justice is this:

…a framework of political objectives, pursued through social, economic, environmental and political policies, based on an acceptance of difference and diversity, and informed by values concerned with:

- achieving fairness, and equality of outcomes and treatment;
- recognising the dignity and equal worth and encouraging the self-esteem of all;
- the meeting of basic needs;
- maximising the reduction of inequalities in wealth, income and life chances; and
- the participation of all, including the most disadvantaged.

So where does Just Therapy, as represented in the 17 contributions within this collection, sit in relation to this framework? The programme of work celebrated in this collection all sits within a common framework of social work/community development/therapeutic interventions well-known both within New Zealand since its emergence in the 1970s and beyond, and, doubtless, to many readers of this Review. Its contribution not only to practice but research (for example on poverty) is regarded by many as impressive, particularly given its service agency focus. It situates its approach within a perspective which argues, citing the work of White and Epston, that:

…unless we are able to adequately connect the problems of clients in oppressed groups to the roots of their oppression and the clients to each other [through collective activity, social action and macro-level change], fundamental change will not occur (Vodde and Gallant 2002: 440).

On the positive side, there is a strong focus on culturally appropriate therapy, and on its gender dimensions. The Just Therapy approach endeavours ‘to discover a way that responsibly addresses the institutional and individual modes of cultural and gender discrimination’, attempting to ‘reverse the societal bias against women and the dominated cultural groups’. In the chapter ‘Cultural and Gender Accountability in the “just therapy” approach’, for example, Tamasese and Waldegrave describe the process by which this way is enacted in practice; the brief account of this particular journey highlights concerns with process, with collective empowerment, consensus-building and building understanding across cultures. Elsewhere, in chapters on ‘Honouring Samoan ways and understanding’ and ‘Gender and culture – together’, Tamasese provides further illuminating ways in which the values of the Just Therapy approach can be carried through into cross-cultural work.

The Samoan chapter was particularly interesting for me in trying to understand what the notion of multiculturalism might mean in a country which remains strongly attached to the idea of biculturalism and to the privileged constitutional position of Maori. As the population of Pacific Islanders and those from other countries in South East Asia and beyond (together totalling one eighth of the New Zealand population – more or less equivalent in size to that of the Maori population but probably growing at a faster rate), grows, how are their distinct cultural rights to
be safeguarded as well as their entitlement to more universal social, civil and political rights, alongside those of the Maori? In the Samoan chapter, we have a little insight into what this particular journey might involve and, in particular, the importance of retaining - or more appropriately, regaining - a spiritual dimension to the process of healing, which is what the attainment of mental health has to incorporate.

The attempt to work with Samoan people around issues which pakeha (white European) - and others - would traditionally conceptualise as mental health issues, brought this response from a group of elders: 'do you realise the significance of what you are asking us to speak about? ... [it] involves exposing all that we believe about life and about persons, about selves, about spirit. This kind of knowledge, in our culture, is not public knowledge'. This is not only a challenge to traditional ‘western’ ways of thinking about mental health, but also to the typical therapist/social worker-client relationship in respect of issues to do with confidentiality and power. The therapeutic and research process needed to be respectful to Samoan ways of thinking and to protect the integrity of the knowledge as well as using it in a way seen by the clients to be helpful. Most social workers and therapists would find this - not at the level of rhetoric but practice - immensely challenging and quite threatening to their conception of their own role in such relationships. And so, for that matter, would most teachers of social work whose theoretical frameworks remain - if much practice in the UK is anything to go by - still predominantly monocultural.

Just Therapy also emphasises its concerns with equity and justice. It has an analysis which, as noted earlier, draws heavily on thinkers such as Freire and Foucault, locating the origins of many of the symptoms with which it deals within the structures and mechanisms of a profoundly unequal society, where people remain poor, unemployed and homeless as a result of broader societal processes and are the victims of racism, sexism and violence. It has also been, in the earlier part of its journey, beyond the recognition that much social work and therapeutic interventions had the effect of simply encouraging the adjustment of people to the conditions – of social and economic impoverishment – which created their presenting problems in the first place, to building collective action to combat these conditions, through a variety of community development initiatives. These have included housing work, advocacy, an unemployed workers union, work with street kids and campaigns to stop abuse and violence, work which is often underpinned by serious social research often undertaken in collaboration with distinguished researchers familiar with differing cultural perspectives on health, ill-health and well-being.

So far, so good: many of the boxes I set up in my outline of the dimensions of social justice at the start of this review, I was able to tick as I read through this account. But despite my admiration for and identification with much of the philosophy of the approach, and some clear gains described within the collection, I was left with some questions.

For a start, it was not clear to me whether many of those ‘clients’ or communities engaging with the process of Just Therapy did so on a voluntary basis or were under some form of obligation - from the courts, the police, the social welfare system more broadly - to do so, and, if so, how the process of engagement was negotiated. This might be a fairly basic flaw in relation to the goal of empowerment, or at the very least a very difficult context within which to work towards that goal. Secondly, the book has no conclusion: and this is not simply a question of being critical of perhaps what are often seen as tired or lazy editors responsible for many compilations, and readers who can’t be bothered to analyse, synthesise and present a considered summary of what has gone before. Perhaps having no conclusion is appropriate for something which is explicitly described as a journey, but even journeys need milestones to help those who are faltering to understand how far along a journey they have come. If the destination is a society which is characterised by social justice rather than inequity and vision, what wider contribution does this approach make? How would we know that it is making a difference? And who would we ask?

Whilst the book lucidly sets out both a vision and, within the relatively narrow confines of its own Family Centre-oriented world, a reality of the Just Therapy approach, there is little sense of
the wider impact of its work or the degree to which it is influencing the work of other agencies. Without this wider connectedness, Just Therapy might be seen to be a small oasis of meaning within a desert of misunderstanding; and, in any case, to paraphrase what someone more theoretically erudite than I once said, the point is not simply to understand the world but to change it. This seems to argue for a rigorous evaluation of its work, an evaluation which is underpinned by the values it itself espouses and which would therefore privilege the views of the ‘client’ communities, one which is not solely based on the accounts of committed practitioners but undertaken by someone more able to access its natural history than the present writer was able to. Perhaps there have been such evaluations; but if so, no reference is made to them. Without that rigour, the celebration has to be somewhat muted. Given the orientation of the approach, and its challenge to traditional social work practice, this seems an urgent task.

And finally, I found myself unable to believe that the consensual approach adopted by Just Therapy did not obscure some important issues about cultural boundaries and about conflicts over norms. The chapter reflecting on work on abuse and violence was tantalising in describing the way in which groups were encouraged to identify the line beyond which behaviour in their culture might be regarded as unacceptably violent or abusive. But what if this line is found to be at very different points for different cultures? How would Just Therapy negotiate a settlement between different parties in this case? This is not simply hypothetical musings but will increasingly become a critical issue in the development of a truly multicultural New Zealand. On the day I wrote this review, the local newspaper featured three articles in its first four pages about clashes in cultural norms: one was a so-called ‘honour’ killing of a daughter by a father enraged by his daughter’s increasingly ‘westernized’ behaviour. He asked to be judged in his own cultural terms and be put to death; the judge – in a country which abolished the death penalty many years ago – refused. The second story involved young Muslim women being expelled from schools for wearing headscarves; the young women themselves took wearing the headscarf to be a sign of cultural affirmation, local feminists saw it as a sign of oppression and the school simply regarded it as an unacceptable deviation from school rules. In the third incident, a twelve year-old Roma girl was forced against her wishes to be both married and, effectively (in western legal terms), raped by her new husband (with a very public display of a bloodstained bedsheet) whilst local police and politicians sat idly by condoning this – in western terms – abusive practice.

In all of these cameos, resolved in differing ways, but always to the disadvantage of the less powerful, there are fundamental cultural conflicts. I found it hard to believe that the work of Just Therapy did not encounter similar conflicts or that its future work would not increasingly have to confront them but did not find adequate discussion of them within the pages of this collection. The question of ‘social justice for whom’ and in whose terms, would then become even more acute and it is a flaw in this generally fascinating series of accounts that it provides no grounded description of how it would approach those situations where even the concept of social justice is disputed.

References

1 See for example Nigel Hall's article, ‘Globalisation and Third World Poverty’ in Social Work Review, Summer 2002: 3-7.