

**The Association of Humanistic Psychology (AHP) and Humanistic Integrative Psychotherapy College (HIPC) joint conference: Celebrating 50 years of Humanistic Psychology: Saturday 7 and Sunday 8 September 2013 at Queen Mary, University of London**

Review by Jay Beichman, counsellor/therapist/lecturer/researcher

It was a pleasure to attend the above conference which had an energy about it that allowed fears and hopes about the future of humanistic psychology to be expressed, discussed and disputed. It felt like a landmark event in which a lot of interested parties felt the need to be present. So we had keynote addresses from Mick Cooper and Maureen O'Hara and workshops from many luminaries of the humanistic movement including John Rowan, Andrew Samuels (a Jungian analyst, yes, but with a lot of humanistic links), Pete Sanders, Tricia Scott and Nick Totton. There were over 150 delegates in attendance and 30 workshops on a whole variety of topics. The workshops ran simultaneously so I could attend 5 of them and those are the ones which I will refer to in this review as well as the keynote addresses, and a whole group symposium on the future of humanistic psychology.

Overall the conference was very inspiring and I found my passion, for therapy and personal growth (via whatever methods), being reinvigorated over the duration of the conference and beyond.

The first keynote address was from Mick Cooper. In some ways Mick Cooper was saying the same thing he often does – about the need for research,

and the pragmatic politics of getting on board with RCTs even if we have issues with their monopolisation of 'evidence' for therapies and their commissioning by mainstream bodies such as 'NICE'. And the message of his 2008 book that the 'facts are friendly' even for humanistic therapies. Something he did mention in his address that did not surprise me but I still found disgruntling was the fact that a lot of CBT trials have been 'fixed'. For example, there have been trials comparing, for instance, person-centred versus CBT, but the person-centred interventions would be delivered by CBT practitioners. This kind of study is riddled with the problem of 'researcher bias'. And this isn't just a few studies; apparently a great number of them have been conducted with research methodology problems. Mick Cooper is nothing if not fair, however, and he stressed, that there are lots of good studies which do demonstrate the effectiveness of CBT, on their own terms, which tend to be the kind of terms that mainstream medical commissioners like and can relate to. I felt myself saddened by what I see as corruption, power and money games at the heart of 'industrial' therapy.

Then, to a more joyful workshop with Catherine Llewellyn. I have only heard of 'Five Rhythms' and was expecting something more gentle. After an hour and half's worth of energetic dancing despite feeling exhausted I also felt revived and revitalised. It occurred to me that this was an interesting way to start rather than end a conference. I also saw how it might lend itself to satire and caricature of humanistic psychology and its practitioners. Yet, I also thought, how so many therapists express their interest in 'the body' and its relation to therapy and would happily pontificate about it theoretically yet not do something as simple as trying to gain freedom of spirit and expression through dance. This, the only non-verbal

workshop I went to, literally embodied what are some core values of the humanistic approach: playfulness, creativity, and expressivity.

I then attended a workshop with the mildly controversial Andrew Samuels. The title of his workshop was 'Always look on the bright side of life? Aggression, lust and other complicated feelings in humanistic psychology.' He had looked in the index of *The Handbook of Person-Centred Counselling and Psychotherapy* and only found a couple of references to aggression and lust. He inferred from this that humanistic psychology struggles to embrace darker feelings such as lust and aggression which may have their upsides. For instance, consciousness itself may be seen as aggressive, because in the attempt to understand a 'whole' one is breaking things into bits. This was an interesting session and although I do not agree that humanistic psychology does not deal with darker feelings – this seems to me the point of view of an analyst – I do see the need to remind those with humanistic leanings to contemplate and embrace feelings such as aggression and lust.

I was excited about Alexandra Chalfont's workshop 'When loyalties war: resolving intellectual dilemmas within the objective self'. I am a dual national and fascinated by holding this 'split' identity and how I experience the struggle as dialogical. So I was hopeful that the workshop would allow an exploration of this kind of theme. It did start out that way, in the introductions, when we found out most of the participants who had chosen this workshop were dual nationals, or dual religions, or dual classes (i.e. a working class parent and a middle class parent precipitating a clash of class values within the same person). In these introductions, the issues of adoption and blended families also came up where even at the parental level you may have multiple positions jostling in one psyche.

Of course, our parents are only part of anyone's story. We internalise values from other family members, and a multiplicity of other sources, so a 'multiple self' especially in a globalising society is more and more the norm rather than the exception. We explored this theme for some of the workshop but then it veered off into an exploration about shame, guilt and the relation of those feelings to the body. This was interesting in itself but I was left wondering how it related to where we started and a bit disappointed that the initial theme had been left behind.

The second day started (after a drama class or something similar for early risers) with the keynote address by Maureen O'Hara. The title of her lecture was 'Dancing Lessons at the Edge: Humanistic Praxis as Cultural Leadership'. The main gist of her talk was that we are experiencing a 'change of era' even more than an 'era of change'. In this new era 'incoherence, uncertainty and anxiety' are the new universal context. Whilst these contexts are associated with pathologies of various kinds they also provide the ground for 'transformative opportunities'. I heard someone dismiss her position as reflecting a kind of 'end time' narrative, akin to millennial doom-mongering (see Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millenium* for more on that count), but I was more sympathetic and can relate to our era as now being one in which, as it were, all the cards are in the air. I also warmed to her take on the obsession with measuring, not just in bodies like NICE, but in our 'audit culture' as a whole, as a kind of 'neurotic' defence against not knowing. In a similar vein, she also made the point that our culture is more concerned with the question 'What is?' which points to a privileging of objects over the question 'What's happening?' which is more concerned with process. Overall, she had a lot of interesting things to say and anyone who wants to follow

up more of what she has to say could do worse than to look at her website [www.maureen.ohara.net](http://www.maureen.ohara.net) .

Then the conference came together in a whole group to discuss the future of humanistic psychology. This was done with smaller groups reporting back to the whole conference. There was a lot of creative thinking and critical debate around this subject. One theme amongst others was how to communicate to the public and interested bodies the value of humanistic psychology in a way that can be more easily understood. On a smaller scale, as individuals, we can actually take pride in our approach and, for instance, put down that we are humanistic practitioners in our publicity and so forth. There were a lot of ideas and my understanding is that the ideas that this symposium generated will be written up for, I believe, the next issue of *Self & Society* (the AHP journal). Tricia Scott also ran a group on a similar theme entitled 'How has the humanistic movement impacted on each of us personally and on today's culture and society? What role do we see for humanistic practice and philosophy in the future?'

One highlight of the conference for me was Pete Sanders' workshop, 'Elitism, Accessibility and Humanistic Therapies in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century or What the Fuck is Humanistic Therapy?' Pete Sanders has a sophisticated yet simultaneously down-to-earth take on therapy and this was one of the more humorous yet seriously engaging presentations. Rooting his thesis in the sociologist Bourdieu, which was actually a lot more fun than it sounds, he made a whole array of interesting points about where humanistic therapy does and does not fit into contemporary culture. Perhaps the most important point being that maybe humanistic therapy reflects more of a 'taste for freedom' than a 'taste for necessity'. In that sense, maybe it is no wonder services such as the NHS prefer

more functional therapies that seem to be more concerned with fundamentals. Then the question becomes do we try to change to fit in or realise that we offer something different. Do we operate inside or outside the system? Do we stay determined to practice in statutory services or feel more comfortable in independent practice? Do we offer an alternative to 'treatment as usual' or become another 'treatment as usual'?

The conference also acted as a book launch for a book *The Future of Humanistic Psychology* which I would recommend as a starting point to explore some of these issues further.

Overall, this was an exciting and important conference, and I would recommend a visit next year.