

Rogue therapists should be treated as abusers

Clients who are manipulated and controlled by their therapists should have somewhere to turn

Charles Moore – Daily Telegraph - 26 January 2021

You hear it said in conversation that psychotherapists try to turn their clients against their parents, family and friends. As a generalisation, this is grossly unfair. It would greatly damage confidence between clients and therapists if people believed it.

There are, however, horrifying examples where this does happen. I have come across several through friends. What we are talking about here is something quite different from simply asking the difficult, intimate questions with which analysis must be concerned. We are talking about a person with power taking over the life of a person who is vulnerable.

The symptoms of takeover follow a recognisable pattern. Having won trust, the rogue therapist/counsellor/guru (this is not a world with clear, commonly accepted qualifications) convinces the client that a close family member – most commonly a parent – has practised something truly appalling such as running a paedophile ring or selling the client for sexual abuse. This is done not by producing evidence, but by thought control, sometimes masquerading as “recovered memory”.

A false belief establishes a false logic. The controlling person tells the victim that she (the victim is more commonly a woman) must sever all contact with her family and friends. If family call or visit her, she must refuse to speak to them. In many cases, the client is told to move to a place chosen by the controller and sometimes even to do prescribed jobs. “I am going on a journey,” the victims often say as they cast off those who love them. It is a journey they are forced to make alone.

Because such victims are over 18, their parents have no legal rights over them. It can be argued that their subjugation is a free-will choice. Parents who disapprove of their children’s choice of religious faith, for example, are not usually right to see that faith as brainwashing. But when the pattern of control is so extreme, prolonged and personal – there are cases which have gone on for 10 years – it is alarming that there is so little recourse in law.

Next week offers a chance to change the situation. Lord Marks of Henley has tabled an amendment to the Domestic Abuse Bill which creates a new offence “of controlling or coercive behaviour by persons providing (or purporting to provide) psychotherapy or counselling services to a client”. The bill already recognises such behaviour as punishable within a household. It clearly exists outside households, too – a particularly cruel abuse of professional trust.

(NB very sadly, this amendment was not passed.)

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