A call to action: empowering people with learning disabilities

In this talk I hope to explore why people with learning disabilities so frequently find themselves living on the edge of their communities and so seldom with a voice to influence their own futures. I will invite the audience to consider what they could contribute themselves to the creation of healthier communities which empower people with learning disabilities and other vulnerable people.

We are not well positioned to provide psychological therapies for such groups and yet they are likely to be lonelier, more traumatised and more emotionally needy people than other community members. Simpler more ordinary interventions designed to empower and psychologically inform may diminish the need for specialist referral, and I will describe the development of library based Book Clubs that are reading the Beyond Words series of picture books, as an example of such an intervention.

The 5 Conference themes of innovation, engagement, applied practice, leadership and social justice - challenging the status quo are all relevant to my call to action to counselling psychologists, but social justice is at its heart. I will suggest that there is too low a level of psychological understanding in the public at large and that psychologists need to contribute energetically to raising public awareness. And that even within counselling psychology there are probably too low aspirations for psychological awareness amongst people with learning disabilities.

One problem I perceive is that trainees are pursuing a professional training which may be too remote from the real lives that people are living. Listening to people with learning disabilities does require a different quality of attentiveness which must be grounded in a basic understanding of their daily experiences. Whilst the creation of a separate disability therapy specialism for people with learning disabilities may seem to be the best way to meet their needs, there is a risk that this will lead those without such specialist training to decline to offer a service to this group. This could be considered discriminatory so I will explore the legal requirements within the Equality Act 2010 and the Mental Capacity Act 2005. To be able to include people with communication and learning difficulties in their practice, counselling psychologists need to be confident in working with people from diverse backgrounds and to have learnt some ways of adapting their approach to meet people at their own starting point.

I hope to inspire some action after the conference by posing some questions to the audience about the best ways we can work together to empower some of the least well served members of society. As Margaret Mead, the well known anthropologist put it: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed it's the only thing that ever has."

Professor Sheila the Baroness Hollins is Professor Emeritus in Psychiatry of Disability at St George’s University of London. She has been President of both the Royal College of Psychiatrists and the British Medical Association, and was appointed an Independent member of the House of Lords in 2010 where she speaks on social justice, mental health and disability issues. Her main research has been in the mental and physical health of people with intellectual disabilities. She currently chairs the BMA Board of Science and is Executive Chair of Beyond Words, which
publishes picture books with an international reach to communicate about life events, relationships and wellbeing to children and adults with communication disabilities. She was recently a castaway on Desert Island Discs, the iconic BBC radio programme.

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