

From the President

Professor Lynne Gabriel OBE, President of BACP

‘The past year has been challenging for our profession, with fractious and divisive dynamics playing out’

As we begin the new year, I send BACP members, staff, Trustees, volunteers and colleagues across the diverse communities involved in the counselling and mental health professions the very best for 2024. My good wishes are also extended to the incoming BACP CEO.

In the wider landscape of global unrest, our local and UK concerns might sound banal, yet these good wishes are offered in the spirit of hope and compassion. Like so many, my heart has been aching for those people caught up in conflict in Ukraine and the Middle East, and for their families and loved ones in other parts of the world. I despair for the terrible losses and the bereaved families, and for those people deeply traumatised by what many regard as unnecessary battles. Trauma impacts across communities and generations and leaves no one untouched. Many are working tirelessly and selflessly to alleviate suffering. Closer to home there are multiple groups galvanised to support dispossessed refugees and migrants from war-torn regions, working to help alleviate the trauma of destitution and displacement.

Globally, we are amid a ‘polycrisis’, a term developed by French sociologist Edgar Morin and popularised by historian Adam Tooze to describe the co-occurrence of multiple crises. This term enables recognition and a sense of ‘this is just how it is at the moment’. Economic scenario analyses suggest that the most probable world order in the decade ahead would not be a unipolar order or a bipolar, Cold War-style competition but rather a multipolar one.¹ Multipolarity depicts a world order that resonates with the pluralistic notion of uneasy equilibrium. However, economic and sociopolitical stability require conscious and intentional commitment to maintaining equilibrium and the need to balance opposing

forces through deliberate practice and reflexive interactions.

On the UK front we anticipate a general election in 2024. Whatever our political colours, many of us are ready for positive and productive societal change - not least on the mental health and social care front, where there are major disparities between funding of health services and community mental health and social care interventions. Roles represented within the counselling and mental health professions have never been more needed. It is time to up the ante in relation to the abilities of those professions and their ready capacity to provide relevant support to individuals, families and communities.

While perhaps not a popular position, I do wonder if political or governmental change could herald the possibility of statutory regulation for counselling and psychotherapy. Criticism of the lower common denominator approach taken by the Health and Care Professions Council, fear of loss of individuality of counsellor or psychotherapist roles and over-scrutiny of the profession are important

concerns. Yet on the contrary, regulation would likely bring professional recognition and place us on a level platform with regulated titles such as ‘counselling psychologist’. Although psychology is decades ahead of us in being embedded in workforce planning across statutory, private and business sectors, I believe that counselling and psychotherapy could gain traction and a wider professional profile and presence if regulated.

I’m watching with interest our colleagues in Ireland where counsellors and psychotherapists are in the process of being regulated. The Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy is a key player in the drive for regulation and is forging a path that UK counsellors and psychotherapists may have to follow at some point. Regulation does not ‘disappear’ professional associations such as BACP, UKCP or BPC. On the contrary, it provides the opportunity for groups and associations to provide a whole range of resources and support, free from the need to provide the self-regulatory aspects represented by the current ‘soft touch’ regulation that does little to inform and support counselling, psychotherapy or the consumers of their services.

Working with and through compassion captures the ethos of the counselling and mental health professions. Our professions are characterised by the vital importance of relational dynamics, from CBT through to psychoanalytical approaches. A growing interest in the ethics of relationships heralds development in relational ethics and its centrality for the resolution of oppression, conflict and risk in personal, family, community and global interactions. Our profession is well placed to proactively and positively contribute to compassionate and constructive change. ■



1. Brannen S. Four Scenarios for Geopolitical Order in 2025-2030: what will great power competition look like? [Online.] Center for Strategic and International Studies 2020; 16 September.