

Interview

Professor Mick Cooper - interviewed by Mr. Joseph Enright, at the “Research: Friend not Foe” Conference



JE: We can read your books, Mick, and we can get a sense of who you are professionally, but I would love to get a sense of “who the man is” so I’ve a few questions to ask! Is that okay?

JE: OK. Growing up, who or what inspired you to become a therapist?

MC: Long answer or short answer?

JE: Eh, short, if possible

MC: I think my dad; he was very progressive and he believed a lot in social justice

JE: OK. What is the secret to your success? - because you’re famous and I’m not? (audience laughs)

MC: (laughs too) I don’t really feel like a success so it’s a difficult

question to answer. Probably anxiety. I think anybody that writes a lot of books must be driven by a lot of anxiety. Things like that come out of a sense of deficiency.

JE: As you say that, I have a sense to mind you. In reading your books and doing research for this interview, I’ve noted your ability to write the way you do, to deliver it in a very normal way for the reader. If anxiety has helped that there’s a lot of us thinking we are very lucky to be able to receive it on the other end. You’ve written a lot of books and I’m wondering what book would you love to write, but you dare not?

MC: The book that I’m writing at the moment is about social justice, about therapeutic change and social change and how the two come together. So it’s a bit

grandiose and it’s a bit ambitious. I’m not sure I’m going to get a publisher for it, and I’m not sure what the market for this is going to be. But it’s stuff that I care deeply about and it’s what I really want to write so I’m just going to go for it and see what happens.

JE: Well, I think books like that need to be written. There’s a lot of us out there that will stand with you. If you were to open a new counselling centre, what would you name it and what would be the motto?

MC: (laughs) Well, I’ve got a little training company called Dialogue Training and I like that word, it’s pretty much my favourite. So Dialogue Counselling, or something like that.

JE: And what would be the motto...

MC: Is that one I could put back to you, Joseph?

JE: Eh, what would be, eh, that’s a good one now, you’re catching me out. (Audience laughs). There’s something in it for me about social justice, equality, a place for all, regardless.

MC: “A place for all”

JE: Brilliant! Did I come up with that? (audience laughs). Now I’m aware you’re a father of four children.

MC: You’re not going to ask me my favourite child? (audience laughs)

JE: No. I wouldn’t have you do that. But I’m wondering, what’s the one thing fatherhood has taught you?

MC: I think putting others before me. Trying to. Learning to hold off on what I want and actually think

about what other people want probably more than anything.

JE: Sounds good.

MC: Yea, I don't know if it's good but I'm trying it.

JE: There's a few things I want to ask you about. You're a researcher and an author, and I'm wondering what inspired you to do that. You said about anxiety but what else has inspired you to do that?

MC: Well there's things I wanted to say and things I wanted to put in order, or categorise. My book on research findings, for example, or on existential therapy – they're about taking big complex fields that I wanted to understand and trying to put them into a different kind of box. I remember as a kid, I used to love Matchbox cars, I'd have about forty. Maybe I've brought that to the counselling field, and it's kind of an OCD thing I guess. People who've read books of mine often say, like you did, that the writing makes it kind of accessible or simple. They may think it's an easy process, but it's a horrible process most of the time, a bit like tidying your room. I don't enjoy it, but it's lovely when things are sorted.

JE: So what keeps you doing it?

MC: For me the drive is around therapeutic social justice and social change. That's what I came into this area for, trying to create better wellbeing, not just for the clients we work with on a clinical level, but on a social level. That gives me a sense of meaning and value in the world. I'm not a brilliant therapist. I'm fine as a therapist, but not brilliant. I guess I found more and more that the contribution I can make is by helping put stuff in order a bit and kind of clear up some of the mess. I think in the therapy

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world that we have such valuable things to communicate from our clients, from our theory and from our research about what can make the world a better place. It's important to me that I find a way to communicate and express those things.

JE: Is there one quote or saying that you live by in your daily life. That helps or inspires you?

MC: Well, my favourite philosopher would be Martin Buber and I always go back to him on things like "all actual life is encounter", it's a lovely one. I was once asked what I would have on my grave and it was a lovely quote from Eugene O'Neill the playwright, which comes from one of his plays "Great God Brown", which says "He was born with ghosts in his eyes and he went looking inside the dark and he got afraid" and I think for me that's been the one, that quote, about being somebody who's really struggled at times with ghosts and demons, and looks to keep going and to do something positive despite that.

JE: Sounds very moving. I'll share my grave inscription with you.

MC: O.K.

JE: I'm plagiarising somebody. It's

from Spike Milligan "I told them I was sick". (Audience laughs). So, Mick, can you tell me what has been your experience of collaboration with other authors?

MC: Probably one of the most difficult people I've ever collaborated with was Ernesto Spinelli, the existential writer, and the single reason is that he's such a brilliant writer. We would do this dialogue where I'd write something and he'd write something back and he'd come up with something so beautiful and eloquent that I thought I just can't answer this because anything I write feels rubbish in comparison! Then there's John McLeod...he's a lovely man, a real delight to work with. He's most intelligent. He is the person I collaborate with most and I see eye to eye with him. John also has a big social justice understanding and really thinks about things from a political angle as well as from a therapeutic angle. And you can see that in his work as well. Even stuff like qualitative research, you know, on one level it's about methodology but underlying that is the politic to help understand experience. He's been great and very flexible to work with. And just recently I've worked with John Norcross. It's an amazing privilege to work with someone like that. He's so smart and knows so much about different fields.

JE: I often struggle with that too in writing. When I write and give it to somebody, they come back with something so beautiful that you think, I'll never get this right!

MC: Yea, totally. You know when I write stuff, it may look like it's quite simple, but I probably wrote it about ten or fifteen times.. everything is worked and reworked. The first draft I write is utter crap, it's about giving myself permission to get stuff down there on the page.

I think in the therapy world that we have such valuable things to communicate from our clients, from our theory and from our research about what can make the world a better place. It's important to me that I find a way to communicate and express those things.

JE: And would you recommend that, for all of us here?

MC: I think there are different ways of writing. The way that I write is quite structured. I always get the structure first. The other thing is, if I was to give you one tip about writing, I would say learn how to type properly. I learned touch-typing when I was fifteen or sixteen at school. That really helped the constant flow.

JE: We might take that as a quote from the conference that Mick Cooper said "Learn to type" (audience laughs)

MC: Maybe the most important thing we've learned!

JE: You mentioned pluralism earlier. Can you describe, or let us understand pluralism in about two minutes? (audience laughs)

MC: Pluralism really comes out of a person-centred way to tailor therapy for the client. Each client is different so how do we develop therapy that's most appropriate for that individual? Listening to that, being responsive to that, being in dialogue with that is really important. So I guess pluralism is like a project-style form of therapy. It's a way of thinking about therapy that is really open, and dialogic, that isn't based on any dogma or any particular school. It isn't trying to make a new school. It's about asking how we can be open enough to really meet clients in what they want.

JE: From listening to you, I think it's about listening to clients and it's also about integration.

MC: Yea. Well, obviously, if you listen to clients, the first thing you discover is that different clients want different things. In which case there's a place for lots of different practices. You don't have to do be able to do everything, you can only do so many things. But it does mean being open to changing practices, integrative approaches, or just being clear that 'person-centred therapy is what I do and that's all I want to do' and referring someone on if they want something else.

JE: So for instance there's a counsellor out there working for many years in a particular way, and pluralism is a relatively new innovation, what would you say to the counsellor that might move them towards taking it on board?

So I guess pluralism is like a project-style form of therapy. It's a way of thinking about therapy that is really open, and dialogic, that isn't based on any dogma or any particular school. It isn't trying to make a new school. It's about asking how we can be open enough to really meet clients in what they want.

MC: Well I wouldn't want to proselytise, if someone is working in a particular way they might be fantastic therapists and becoming more integrative may not be helpful. What pluralism challenges is not any particular therapeutic practice but the dogma that sometimes comes with such a practice.

JE: Which leads into my next question! A lot of students and counsellors often wonder whether CBT has a place in humanistic integrative framework and is it possible to integrate it, in your experience?

MC: I think so. At the end of the day all that therapies are trying to do is help people find better ways to deal with things. I think we should look at things in terms of the essence of what we're trying to do, instead of in a literal sense. I think the danger is that the different therapies become like different religions, fighting amongst each other over really small differences. Just as most religions are about faith and belief in God, most therapies are trying to help clients find better ways of living their lives. Another metaphor would be to say that therapy is a bit like education. There's not one way that everybody learns. Education is partly about working things out for yourself and partly about having input from the teacher. There's a place for both. As humanistic person-centred therapists we can draw on methods from a whole range of different approaches.

JE: I agree. Can you not be in a relationship with the client, can we not talk to the client and see what they want and then see what we can do with it? And know what we're talking about. I have a fear that it might just seem like a technique otherwise.

MC: Yea. I think it's not great if you work in a very relational way and you suddenly bring in a new technique. Learning the skills of humanistic, non-directive practice is really challenging, it takes time. We're used to giving advice and telling people that everything is going to be alright. You need to take the time to clear that away so that you can really be with someone without those things. But as you go on in your career, integrating those things back in at a high level can be really helpful.

JE: I have four questions that I'm going to finish with, Mick. You had mentioned about being in therapy yourself. I wonder would you be willing to share with us what you've learned about yourself as a client, co-creating relationships with a therapist?

MC: I think as a client I had a lot of bad therapy relationships that I didn't find helpful. I think I often felt like I got trapped in something that I couldn't challenge. I was unable to say "this isn't working for me". I felt that if I complained it was getting interpreted and I didn't have much power.. the therapies that have been most helpful to me haven't been the ones that have been perfect, or about particular technique. It's been the ones that have been most open, a bit humble, that they messed stuff up but it felt like they were genuinely caring. I've had existential therapists, I've had person-centred therapists. Although I'm an existential type of person, the best therapist I've had as a client was a Kleinian therapist, a really nice older woman who was very caring, very attentive. I had a lovely psychiatrist who was a bit CBT-ish but who was incredibly respectful. One of the most helpful things he said to me (when I was struggling with some anxiety stuff) was "just think about how a normal person would respond to that".

If someone else had said it I'd be lodging a complaint but because of his personal qualities it was a lovely thing...He really met me. There was a sense of someone caring about me, taking me seriously, and respecting me. And I guess that's what I try to do with my clients.

You could imagine as a humanistic therapist, that is like the worst thing you could ask. But actually it was lovely, because of his stance and his attitude and it felt very collaborative. If someone else had said it I'd be lodging a complaint but because of his personal qualities it was a lovely thing.

JE: Sounds like he met you

MC: He really met me. There was a sense of someone caring about me, taking me seriously, and respecting me. And I guess that's what I try to do with my clients.

JE: You are a very busy man and a busy professional. And in this profession we're giving all the time. I'm wondering how you take care of yourself?

MC: I do a lot of running and I think that's been a real lifesaver for me. Probably, three or four times a week now. And in Brighton there's a lovely seafront. That's the main thing I do. Spend some time with the kids when I can. Watch TV. But I think running, in dealing with things, has probably been more helpful than therapy!

JE: Second last question. The world is dominated by social media at the moment and I see that you use it as a platform quite a lot. I wonder how you take care of your privacy and your family's privacy.

MC: That's an interesting question. I was posting some pictures of my kids when they were younger and someone raised that question. I

tend to be quite open. I tend to be fairly trusting. My kids love posting videos and we check that the content is ok but we talk to them very frequently about internet safety and obviously that's really important.

JE: Final question. Lots of people here in the audience are trainees and novice counsellors. Is there one bit of advice you want to leave us with?

MC: As a person-centred therapist you want advice? (Audience laughs.) Hmm... as a trainee, I came into this field thinking there's this hierarchy, you climb from the bottom, from trainees, therapists, to trainers, people who write books, I think you can feel really low down and not realise how much you know and have to contribute. Like the fantastic presentations we've already seen at this conference. Realising it's not like an elevator that you finally get to the top. We're all in it together and we're all learning together. We've all got stuff to learn and we've all got stuff to contribute. And recognising that you can make that contribution and particularly for this conference, research is a big contribution.

JE: For your own very generous contribution, thank you very much indeed, Professor Mick Cooper. 🌀

Bibliography

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