

good counsellor should possess: the ability to hold theoretical templates lightly, to be guided by the empirical evidence of how a client behaves in the room, rather than by pre-acquired convictions (whether traditional psychiatric diagnoses, or popular 'diagnoses' like 'Co-dependency').

Educational scholars speak of the capacity to 'generalise and abstract', to tease out an underlying theme from a lengthy account, to stand back from it and think about what it means. Counsellors who can only describe, without standing back and looking at the organising principles and assumptions, are unlikely to be able to accurately detect themes in the material a client presents. But if the counsellor moves too rapidly to impose a set of rigid assumptions on what the client says, that is no better.

As Donald Schon (1991) showed, accurate and useful 'big pictures' develop as the result of complex (and partly unconscious) interactions between the counsellor's personal history, her clinical experience (memories of past clients who have behaved in somewhat similar ways to this one), and theoretical templates that help her make sense of the dynamics in the room. Self-evidently, such 'practice wisdom' only develops over years. But at the point of entry to a training program, we can at least look for evidence of flexibility, tolerance for ambiguity, for the awareness that there may be more than one explanation for something—in contrast to a preference for a single 'correct' explanation, or rigid clinging to a single framework for understanding things. In their landmark text, McAuliffe and Erikson (2011) return again and again to the ability to embrace complexity and ambiguity as vital to the development of counselling competence.

How might we test this? Viewing of a carefully selected segment of a movie or TV show—a segment that poses both emotional and cognitive challenges and resists reduction to simplistic formulas—can provide evidence of such capacities. Requiring a written response to the segment will give us some insight into applicants' ability to tolerate ambiguity and complexity without being 'swamped' by it.

Given the inevitable subjectivity of many of the judgements that have to be made in counselling, it is important that we intake students who are prepared to balance their compelling experience of this individual client against the generalisations in the professional literature. In contrast to psychology, with its emphasis on 'evidence-based practice', counselling and psychotherapy have elevated the importance of trained clinical subjectivity. But it isn't ever going to be simply one or the other; it is the ability to move backwards and forwards between both poles, to hold both perspectives simultaneously, that is required for competent practice. Once again, we return to the capacity for flexibility and tolerance of ambiguity as one key to successful counselling.

Paradoxically, however, counselling and psychotherapy also call for judgement, and for decisive intervention, especially at times of crisis. The capacity to rule something 'in' or 'out', to take a firm stand, and to rein in self-indulgent, unproductive talk, can sometimes be as important as the capacity to tolerate ambiguity. So, in terms of the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory, we need to seek applicants whose 'J' and 'P' scores are closely balanced. Someone who leaps to judgement automatically, rapidly decides what type of person she is dealing with, and what type of approach is required, is (as we argued above) unlikely to do well as a counsellor, although she may please managers whose agencies are in thrall to demands to 'push the clients through' and 'achieve measurable outcomes'. But by the same token, will someone with a very dominant 'perceiving' function be capable of confronting a client (albeit in an appropriate way, and at an appropriate moment)?

The possession of an internal locus of control is important. It is easier to help strongly self-critical trainees to develop a more objective sense of what may be beyond their control than it is to help those who

automatically assume that whatever goes amiss in counselling must be the client's fault. Similarly, an applicant who cannot wait a year until the next round of admissions, but immediately seeks out a course he can start in a few weeks, is unlikely to make the kind of counsellor who will patiently wait for a client to be ready for change; and an applicant who cannot observe reasonable boundaries around an admissions process, but wants to 'jump the queue', get the ear of the admitting staff, or break into what another applicant is saying to tell her own story, is not likely to be able to subordinate her own needs to those of a client, and to read her client's cues appropriately. In these, as in many other ways, applicants' behaviour during the selection process will provide in-the-room clues as to their suitability for the profession—something I have expanded on in Crago (2003). As with clients, what applicants do is a far better guide to who they are than what they say, since conscious control is far more easily exercised over the latter.

In that same paper, I have outlined some principles for running a selection process that stands a decent chance of admitting students likely to benefit from a training program, and of selecting out those applicants who are not. With the help of colleagues, I have come to realise that small group selection processes are more useful than one-to-one selection interviews, because the group environment supplies a far richer field of information on how the applicant copes with others—whose attitudes, values and behaviours may be very different from her own. I've also found it vital to have two interviewing staff, not just one. A selection process is only as ethical, rigorous and insightful as those who conduct it, and a single selector is extremely vulnerable to countertransference-inspired bias, both for, and against, certain applicants.

No selection process, however carefully planned, is ever going to do a perfect job. Inevitably, a few unsuitable applicants will slip through, only to be identified later. But our job at the point of application is to offer places to those who, we are confident, can take and use what our program offers, and become students we will be proud to graduate. Instead of 'being kind to be cruel'—by admitting applicants who are unlikely to withstand the rigours of training—I suggest we be 'cruel to be kind'—kind not only to those we admit, but even more importantly, kind to their future clients, to whom every selection process and every set of training standards must ultimately be responsible.

References

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Hugh Crago has taught counselling at Griffith University, the University of New England, Jansen-Newman Institute (St Leonards), The Institute of Counselling (Strathfield), the University of Western Sydney and Australian Catholic University. He is co-author with Penny Gardner of *A Safe Place for Change: Skills and Capacities for Counselling and Therapy* (forthcoming, IP Communications, 2011), and of several other books and many articles.