



## *Training for a relational art*

In discussions about what makes counselling/psychotherapy distinct from psychology and social work, one thing seems to me to be central. When we train counsellors, we train them in self-awareness and interpersonal sensitivity. In other words, we train them for *relational* knowledge and skills. Psychology and social work, broadly speaking, do not regard these things as part of their core curriculum. In the case of psychology, they are only invoked when the clinical (as opposed to the scientific) phase of professional education begins. Nobody requires that students entering undergraduate psychology or social work programs should be able to demonstrate ability to reflect upon the course of their own life, or show awareness of their own emotional 'baggage'. Nobody requires that they participate in experiences designed to enhance their awareness of how others see them, or how their 'natural helping style' is likely to impact on clients. With a few honourable exceptions, this remains the case even at postgraduate level.

Of course, both social work and psychology expect that graduates who do end up working in-depth with clients' emotional issues will show such qualities, but their training does not specifically aim to develop those areas of awareness, except via supervision of students on placement. I know of psychology lecturers who specifically advise undergraduates with an interest in a counselling career to complete Lifeline training. It seems there is no room in the 'scientist practitioner' curriculum for such activities. Again, this suggests that such training is seen as an *adjunct* to professional preparation, not as an essential part of it.

In striking contrast, much of the training of counsellors and therapists focuses on self- and other-awareness—to the extent that other disciplines might well accuse us of neglecting key areas of knowledge, such as the social and political context of welfare systems, abnormal psychology, personality theory, social psychology, group dynamics, and human development. Our curriculum emphasis indicates that we see counselling and psychotherapy as *relational arts*, that is, we are attempting to prepare our graduates to operate skilfully and sensitively within a therapeutic *relationship*. At the very least, this relationship forms a vital *context* for clients' learning, change and growth (as when a client trusts his counsellor sufficiently to take on board something that his intimates have failed to get through to him). Sometimes (as in long-term psychotherapy) the therapeutic relationship will become the actual *instrument* of that learning, change and growth. As Yalom eloquently puts it, *'It's the relationship that heals, it's the relationship that heals, it's the relationship that heals'*.

Where other helping professions might emphasise knowledge and skills, counselling and therapy emphasise *process* rather than *content*. This is one of the things that gets in the way of our being properly understood by governments, funding bodies, and indeed, the general public, since lay people see 'helping' automatically in terms of content. Content is something you can write down, manualise, conduct outcome studies on, and turn into PowerPoint slides. The instrumental concept of counselling as *imparting* content (knowledge and skills) to clients corresponds with what teachers do, what doctors do, what other 'experts' and 'professionals' do. Doctors diagnose your problem, and prescribe medication, surgery, or some other form of treatment. No wonder psychology has adopted the same paradigm—assessment, followed by treatment tailored to the diagnosis. Everybody understands content, and

anybody can 'see' it. By contrast, process is slippery, tricky, a matter of feeling and instinct. Its results are observable, but not the thing itself. It is something that happens *within* a person, or *between* people.

In fact, the ability to distinguish process from content should be one of the things that we look for in applicants for counselling and therapy programs. Trainees who are preoccupied with the content of what their client is saying are unlikely to serve their clients well in the longer term (although in the short term a focus on content can at least reassure clients that their counsellor is attending to what is important to them). If a counsellor is not able to notice *how* their client relates to them, *how* they tell their story (as opposed to what is 'in' the story), then they will

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ultimately fail to be helpful in the way their client most needs. I'll return to this topic in a later column, where I consider what we should be looking for in selecting candidates for training. For now, let's just say that our training is distinguished by an attempt to enhance trainees' *awareness of process* and their *knowledge of process*, so that as they mature, they will learn increasingly to harness this awareness in the service of their clients, instead of trying to teach things to their clients, or 'change' them via an 'armamentarium' of 'techniques' and 'strategies' which sound impressive in theory, yet which often fail to be effective in the longer term because they do not arise organically out of the therapist-client relationship. That relationship is nearly always conceived of as a two-person one; this dyadic paradigm is actually inadequate, and our training fails our graduates in this regard, but that is something I'll come to in a future column.

So *process* is slippery, and training in awareness of self and other is *risky* and *challenging* in a way that no content-driven program of study can ever be. It is precisely for this reason that I have argued in a forthcoming paper that perhaps the training of counsellors and therapists does not belong in universities at all, since the academic paradigm, for all its advantages in terms of a rigorous attitude to evidence and (one would hope) to assessment, is not set up to deal well with process, or with the emotional realm, as opposed to the intellectual. We cannot develop students' self- and other-awareness simply by setting them readings, or asking them to write essays made up of a string of quoted opinions from 'authorities' on person perception, attitude formation, relationship choice, and so on. Of course, such reading and writing may well prompt self-reflection ('Oh, I guess that's how I relate to people too' or, 'Oh my God, I wonder if I might be one of those that she's talking about!') Such reactions are common when students study sociology, social psychology, criminology, and other academic subjects, but they rarely promote the

vivid, hard-hitting, lasting realisations that would-be counsellors and therapists need to experience if they are to be effective in their chosen work. That is why the training of our students must include experiences where they can learn directly, in interpersonal contexts, about their own interpersonal strengths and weaknesses. They need more than just feedback from staff, more than just feedback from clinical supervisors. They need a range of feedback from their peers as well. They should ideally come to realise how their typical behaviour is seen by other members of their families, or by their workmates.

All of this is difficult stuff—sometimes exciting and joyful, often painful or vexing. Nobody likes to be told that they talk too much, that their silent smile seems ‘smug’ or ‘superior’ to others, that their valued ‘feisty’ attitude to the world can strike others as opinionated and rude. These are ‘home truths’ that we grow up protecting ourselves from, ‘home truths’ that even our best friends and lovers are scared to tell us. And it is not as if any one of these reactions *is* a ‘truth’ (in the old, pre-postmodernist sense of that word). Only by hearing a range of reactions from a range of very different individuals can our students build up a reliable sense of how they affect others, and what parts of their typical attitudes and actions may need to be modified or restrained in certain interpersonal contexts. Taking such feedback ‘on board’ may—and ideally *should*—lead to self-questioning and self-examination. Which, of course, takes students into the territory of personal therapy—another experience which large, bureaucratic, government-funded institutions are poorly equipped to handle, or even understand.

Most of all, our students need to learn to pay close, accurate attention to the responses they evoke in others, because this is the kind of attention they will need to pay to their clients. ‘This kind of person is going to see me as withholding and contemptuous unless I say something’; ‘With someone like her, I need to throttle back my dramatic adjectives, and speak more slowly and quietly, or I’ll scare her out of her wits’. Sensitive, well-attuned listening is the core skill for our field, from one-off telephone counselling to longterm psychoanalytic psychotherapy. During their education, it is crucial that trainees shift from focusing on *what they should be doing to their clients* to focusing on *what their clients*

*are experiencing*, and this shift can only be facilitated effectively by the kinds of feedback that I have been discussing. Process interventions cannot be learned by reading or studying manuals.

If self- and other-awareness is so vital a part of the training of counsellors and psychotherapists, then we should be paying close attention to how it can be embodied in curricula, and how curricula can be translated into meaningful, coherent training processes. I am not convinced that we have got all that far with this task. As I said in my first column, too many of our educators rely on structures and practices remembered from their own training days, and are unwilling to question them. Universities, however, will certainly question what we do, and then, too often, we will find ourselves at a loss for what to say to justify it. We urgently need a set of plain-language training principles that have some hope of making sense to lay people, and which do not gloss over some of the uncomfortable realities of training. One of them, as I suggested at the beginning of this column, should be that since counselling/psychotherapy is a relational art, then training for it must of necessity be relational, and hence, involve self- and other-awareness. But, having established that, we need immediately to talk about who we would offer such training to—and there we will immediately encounter greater possibilities for misunderstanding. That will be the subject to my final column for this year.



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