
Book Review: *COUNSELLING FOR SEXUAL ABUSE*: K MACDONALD, I LAMBIE & L SIMMONDS, OUP

Helen Palmer

Reviewing this book affords a satisfying sense of what is fitting for this inaugural issue of the NZAP Journal. Both book and journal are evidence of a thriving therapeutic community becoming increasingly visible to itself and the society in which it operates. This book arose from a series of workshops in 1992 presented by the authors as staff of the Leslie Centre in Auckland.

The authors promise a practical focus as they explore resources, therapeutic options, methodology and background information about sexual abuse. One strength of the book is that this practical focus is maintained throughout, so the question of how the theory is applied is consistently addressed with clinical examples, guidelines and suggestions. Excellent referencing and a bibliography which covers writings from the last 25 years helps this practical focus.

The book is written in a conversational style with a detailed summation of topics covered in each chapter rather than having a detailed index. The needs of different client populations, children, adolescents, parents, and families are specifically addressed. A chapter on offenders provides useful information when working with survivor clients, although more separation of paedophilia and abuse of adults would have been valuable, and present a more complex profile. Having comprehensively covered the field of sexual abuse the authors then address personal and professional issues for counsellors, dealing with therapist survival, working as a team, and agency issues.

A strength also is that the authors define their terms and devote a chapter as well as part of the introduction to articulating the basic theoretical assumptions which underpin their techniques and strategies. They acknowledge the book has few original ideas per se, but what is new, and offers a stimulating contribution to the therapeutic community, is the integrated model of therapy they present which is based on a combination of systems theory and feminism.

This combination provides a more inclusive theoretical model which presumably avoids the dangers of a single perspective becoming entrenched as the politically or clinically 'correct' position. However, the authors are identified with a solution based health approach of brief therapy, and there are many indicators they view this as a more politically 'correct' position than that of therapists working longterm with clients. Although they say the model guides the way they work, rather than the number of sessions (which could be more than 30), it is

interesting that the two major case examples are extremely short term. The choice of male clients for these is a surprising one given the authors' attention to gender awareness, and given that the current client population is more often female than male.

One study is of a 10 year old boy who was significantly traumatised over a 12 month period of abuse. The successful therapy comprised 3 family sessions and 3 individual interviews. Contact with the boy's family continued over several years and all reports indicated that he had successfully dealt with the abuse. The authors do affirm this outcome was due largely to the support provided by the family and the boy's involvement. The other is of a 19 year old man who is a composite of several male clients and this case comprises 5 individual sessions. Obviously this case cannot be evaluated in the same way. But the implications for working with sexual abuse are enormously important. If brief therapy is here successful, is this always the case? How does this make the therapist working longterm with sexual abuse feel? What does it mean in terms of working with transference and counter-transferential dynamics – not acknowledged in the brief therapy model. It is a pity there is not more research available to determine these complex questions, although the authors acknowledge the need for more research in their closing chapter. If they are in a position to give more detail from evaluative follow-ups at the Leslie Centre, this could be crucial research data.

The position the authors take on what they call gender-appropriate counselling, women working with women, men working with men, joins the political debate current over this issue. While they have a clear rationale for this policy, I consider it dangerous to become fixed or prescriptive with this issue. Mixed gender might be the truly gender-appropriate counselling in a particular circumstance.

The authors state those who will get most out of the book will be experienced counsellors wanting to know more about the specific skills required for work with sexual abuse. It is also an excellent resource for other professionals working in this area, and for counsellors in training so they become aware of the rich spectrum which exists in New Zealand.