5
Deaf Counsellors and Counselling:
A Personal View

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Introduction

Working as a counsellor – when I happen to be Deaf – with both Deaf and hearing people has its challenges. This personal response was prompted by an article in a recent issue of this Journal (Volume 26, Number 1) by Dianne Hill, school counsellor at the Kelston Deaf Education Centre in Auckland (Hill, 2005, p. 76). Hill's experience as a hearing professional working within a Deaf environment is a valuable insight not only for counsellors in general but also for me as a Deaf person who is a counsellor (Hill, 2005, p. 80). The following reflection is my own personal view and experience regarding issues facing counsellors who are Deaf.

I have been working full-time with Deaf communities in the lower half of the North Island since 1994. Prior to that I worked with Deaf communities in Melbourne for two years, and I have also had experience working in Sydney. My training background is in Theology and Philosophy, and I was a Catholic priest for ten years. I am now married and work as a chaplain to the Deaf communities in the Palmerston North and Wellington dioceses. I have a profound hearing loss in both ears resulting from an illness when I was 18 months old. As my deafness was progressive over a period of time in my childhood, I was able to acquire English as my first language. I am fluent in New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) which is my normal mode of communication with Deaf clients.

Becoming a counsellor

It may seem a strange career choice to be a counsellor when I am Deaf. In truth it was not an easy path to follow. My experience in Deaf communities showed that Deaf people were no different than others in their need for counselling from time to time. However, in New Zealand there are few profoundly Deaf people who are qualified as counsellors. Luckily circumstances conspired to make my training as supportive as possible: firstly, I was lucky to have another Deaf person training with me, accompanied by two NZSL interpreters; secondly, our class was very supportive and open to accommodating the particular needs of two Deaf students; thirdly, our tutors provided strong encouragement all the way; and finally, I was able to persevere with the great support of my partner and wife.

Becoming a counsellor was not just a case of saying that disability is not a barrier to what one can achieve. For me it became very much a phenomenological issue in that I perceived counselling to rely heavily on the skill of listening. In my experience, deafness made "listening" an extremely challenging and at times very difficult endeavour to undertake. In the context of working with Deaf clients this was not so much of a problem, but how effectively could a Deaf person listen to a hearing person? As I was to grow to appreciate along the way, the Narrative Approach – perhaps more than others – dealt very effectively with this issue of "listening" in a way that paralleled the challenges I faced as a Deaf person.

Deafness and a counselling approach

In my experience the very first challenge was to successfully receive the "content" from a client. I had to overcome all sorts of challenges to get the entire content of even one sentence. While this was most common with hearing clients, it could also be a challenge with Deaf clients because individually Deaf people have very different levels of language and communication skills. Michael White was probably the most influential exponent of the Narrative Approach, which helped clarify this issue of "content" for me (White & Epston, 1990). His ability to explore the different levels of meaning of what he received enabled a constructive framework to develop between counsellor and client. I was able to witness this first hand at a workshop he held in Napier in August 2004, which was organised by the Napier Family Centre (White, 2004). In White's presentation I could identify with the constructive framework of meaning in my own sessions. From a Deaf point of view I can never assume I am on exactly the same wavelength as any of my clients simply because of the struggles I have in effectively constructing the pieces of content that I receive.

This experience of assuming nothing is one that fits in well with clarifying skills and mapping experiences. While the content of various clients' stories can contain common elements, such as the challenge of alcohol, or communication breakdowns in relationships, White showed in his work that the construction of the story was unique with each individual (White & Epston, 1990). My deafness, therefore, helped me bring a fresh approach to each session because in my need to affirm accurately the content I received, there was no way that I could say I got that story before. Over a period of time I was able to appreciate that being Deaf was not necessarily a barrier to effective listening. In general the difference in approach between me and a hearing counsellor would be that while a hearing counsellor could quickly process the exact content of a client's expression, I would take a bit longer to process what was happening. This resulted in a more measured approach, while at the same time I was trying

to be flexible to where the client wanted to go. One of the difficulties of this process is that it takes a lot of energy, especially with hearing clients, so I have to be particularly aware of self-care needs.

Professional challenges

While there were many challenges to overcome just to graduate as a counsellor, the learning curve gets even steeper in the professional world. Hill's experience is in the context of working in Auckland, in the largest Deaf community in New Zealand. Comparatively, even with Australia, New Zealand is a minnow in the Deaf world. Like most of the hearing population in New Zealand, the Deaf population drifts towards the main centres. I work mostly in Palmerston North and Wellington. This means that I am dealing with much smaller numbers of Deaf people than I would in Auckland, and I work mostly with Deaf adults. There is not enough counselling work in the Deaf communities I work with, so I also look for work with hearing clients. The biggest professional challenge is actually getting the work. Though I have achieved a standard in counselling qualification I have found it difficult to obtain professional support from both Deaf and hearing agencies. In fairness, agencies can only do so much, and uninformed hearing people may be put off when they realise the counsellor is Deaf.

Provincial limitations

Working in smaller provincial cities definitely has a lot of disadvantages for the Deaf. Many Deaf people I have worked with have never had access to effective counselling in the past, let alone Deaf counsellors. This usually means there is no awareness of the benefits of the service which I and my fellow Deaf counsellors are offering. I have found Deaf professional networks to be extremely limited – even non-existent – in many areas outside Auckland, mainly due to a lack of professionally trained Deaf people, so there is little peer support. This experience is not restricted to the counselling profession, as other professionals who are Deaf have had similar experiences. Respect from hearing colleagues I know is relatively more forthcoming because of the networks I established during my counselling training. Perhaps the biggest issue for me is the limited communication network for Deaf people within New Zealand. The two main ways that clients can contact me are by fax or email. Direct phone use for hearing clients is usually not possible because most do not have access to the New Zealand Relay service for Deaf people. This simple communication inconvenience is enough in many instances to defer regular hearing clients. They would not be used to communicating with a stranger who they can't hear on the phone.

Technologically, as far as Deaf people go we are some way off the pace. For me the

challenge is often just to get in contact with hearing professionals to promote my service. While the relay service provides a means of promotion and making contact with hearing colleagues, it is not always accessible and can be very time consuming. Because it is in its infancy it will be some time before it reaches optimum capacity. The other difficulty is that there are very few professional NZSL interpreters available in provincial New Zealand, and this becomes a critical shortage at short notice. NZSL interpreters are an important factor in Deaf people having access to any public or professional service.

The presence of regular qualified NZSL interpreters in a region indicates that the Deaf community there are used to accessing services most hearing people take for granted. However, the absence of qualified NZSL interpreters means that many Deaf people in the provinces do not have adequate professional access, hence they rely on friends or family. Without adequate access Deaf people are restricted in their options and ability to appreciate the wide spectrum of services commonly available to hearing people. In some cases this has resulted in problems being dealt with within Deaf communities by their own members, regardless of whether these members are sufficiently skilled or qualified. The networks I and my Deaf colleague are setting up as professional counsellors are very much pioneering endeavours. Educational input is often required over and above normal networking because a Deaf counselling service is a new experience for many people.

The main government agency working with Deaf communities – The Deaf Association of New Zealand – was seen in the past as a sort of Social Welfare service for Deaf people. It became something of a Jack of all trades, master of none. Coupled with an almost non-existent number of qualified Deaf professionals, the awareness among Deaf people of professional boundaries separating different services was very limited. The idea of a Deaf counsellor being very different from a service co-ordinator or social worker, for example, was not something that many Deaf people were aware of. This situation has slowly begun to change in recent years. The established hearing networks which have developed with parents, school staff and professional colleagues at the Kelston Deaf Education Centre are probably on a level unmatched in most areas south of Auckland – the notable exception being New Zealand's only other Deaf school at Sumner in Christchurch.

Conclusion

It is my experience that the challenges for counsellors who are Deaf are not exclusive and reflect to some extent broader challenges for professionals who experience other disabilities. In setting up networks I have generally found among newly acquainted

non-disabled professionals a lack of awareness concerning the unique experience of professionals who have a disability. Perhaps this can partly be explained by the lack of qualified disabled professionals visible in public services. Certainly over the last 20 years or so I have yet to meet or hear of any Deaf doctors or lawyers in New Zealand. Similarly, other qualified Deaf professionals currently practising in New Zealand are very few and far between. From a counselling point of view counsellors who are Deaf and counsellors who experience other disabilities could be a valuable resource for NZAC workshops in creating a greater awareness and challenging professionals to consider other perspectives in their work.

References

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