More than Picking at Scabs

Working with Trainee Counsellors

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Abstract

Cecelia Winkelman weaves three strands together as she reflects on her use of a role training approach in the teaching of counselling. The first strand focuses on the author's methods for assisting counselling trainees to develop empathy, a naïve attitude and the ability to enter into the experience of their clients. In the second strand the use of Moreno's role training method is described, including adaptations developed by the author to maintain links with the trainee-interviewer and the trainee-interviewee as two protagonists, and the training group as the third protagonist. The third strand addresses defensiveness that emerges in the training group, including the development of safety and connection and the use of the focal conflict model.

Key Words

empathy, enactment, experience, defensiveness, focal conflict model, protagonist, psychodrama, role reversal, role training, sculpture, spectrogram, trainee counsellors, vignette

> *The class sits in a semi-circle facing two chairs positioned for a one-to-one interview. Two trainee counsellors have volunteered to come forward and sit in those chairs, taking up the roles of interviewer and interviewee, terms used in this training group in place of counsellor and client. So far, the interviewee has spoken about her parents. She is concerned about a conflict between them, the way that one parent appears to discount the wishes of the other.*
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> *At this point in the training session, my attention as group leader is focussed on the interviewer. Intent on coaching her to expand her thinking about the interviewee and*

to allow her imagination to flow, I freeze the action and comment on the interviewee's role in her family system. The interviewee immediately reacts by distancing herself. Perhaps she feels ignored or criticised. The effect is palpable. I stop and notice that there is a change in the atmosphere. It feels strained and dry. The group members respond by acting out. One group member calls out that the interviewee looks angry.

Bringing this part of the training session to a close, I invite the other group members to share with the interviewer and interviewee their learning about developing themselves as counsellors. Then, a group member who has not yet shared exclaims, "What are we doing here, picking at scabs?"

This scene captures a moment in group leadership, its impact on the trainees, the way that they involved themselves in learning and the degree of defensiveness aroused in the group. Using it as illustration, I will draw on several strands to weave together reflections about my use of a role training approach in the teaching of counselling.

As a teacher of counselling, my aim is to assist trainees to develop their capacity to be *naïve inquirers*, that is, to stay open to understanding the experience of clients rather than adopting a problem-solving approach. One strand, therefore, is driven by the conviction that trainee counsellors need to develop their capacity to listen empathically to their clients. A second strand describes my use of Moreno's (1980) role training method in this learning. My analysis of the scenario above led me to recognise that both interviewer and interviewee are protagonists for the group, and that I need to maintain a link with both as well as with the group. One aspect of this article, thus, is focused on how I have adapted the role training approach to work with two protagonists and how I have come to view the group itself as a third protagonist.

In assisting trainee counsellors to develop themselves as empathic listeners who can reverse roles with their clients, I have observed how they also warm up to self-judgement. The third strand is, therefore, focused on how I use an understanding of safety, connection (Moreno, 1978) and the focal conflict model (Whitaker & Lieberman, 2008) to work with defensiveness that tends to arise in the training group.

Empathy: Entering into the Experience of the Client

Empathy can be defined as an attempt to identify with another person's experience. It is typically understood as having both a cognitive and an affective component (Carkhuff, 1969; Corey, 2009). That is, when empathy is aroused one tends to have an intellectual understanding, as well as an emotional resonance for the other. A third component is the naming of the other's experience. A fourth component in the context of a counselling relationship involves the counsellor responding to the client in a way that expresses empathic understanding. Empathy influences a client in a number of ways. In response to a counsellor's empathy, a client may feel validated and perceive the attempt to understand as an invitation to explore the issue. As a result, the focus of the session may move from the client's external world to the inner experience (Rogers, 1980).

Trainee counsellors tend to lack empathic skills. This is demonstrated in the training sessions where they act as interviewers and interviewees for one another. Prompted by the desire to help the interviewee, an interviewer will frequently adopt a problem-solving approach before the interviewee has had an opportunity to present and explore a concern. Interviewers believe they should be in control and have the answers, rather than sitting with the uncertainty that both interviewee and interviewer may experience. Some interviewers paraphrase, reflect feelings and summarise, believing that this is sufficient to demonstrate empathy but in many an instance, it is not. Many trainee interviewers believe that they have responded empathically, and do not understand that they have not addressed the needs of the interviewee for genuine empathy.

Since the training session described above, I have shifted my teaching focus from the actual words spoken by interviewers to an approach that emphasises their attitude. I based this change in focus on the wisdom of a colleague. "If the trainee counsellor adopts an attitude of trying to understand the experience of the client, the words will follow" (M. Scarfe, personal communication, 07 May 2007). To learn this attitude, trainee counsellors are required to live with uncertainty without becoming self-persecutory. A challenge, when low tolerance for uncertainty tends to elicit student defensiveness and a need to control. This is where role training has made its contribution to the work.

Role Training: Learning to Enter the Client's World

Moreno's role training approach (Baim, Burmeister & Maciel, 2007; Blatner, 1988; Clayton, 1992; Holmes, Karp & Watson, 1994) lends itself to assisting trainees to develop their capacity to sit with the client, to listen empathically, to create a space for something to emerge and to tolerate uncertainty. In what follows, I describe and illustrate the elements of role training that I typically use in my work.

The Spectrogram

The spectrogram is a continuum-in-action on a criterion relevant to the group's developmental stage. It gets group members up and moving and gives them the opportunity to connect with others. I ask the trainees to place themselves on an imaginary line from zero to one hundred that stretches from one wall to the other. The criterion I select is relevant to the group of trainee counsellors, for example, their comfort level regarding the use of silence in counselling. I have noticed that many appear to believe that constant talk in a counselling session is a necessity, not recognising that the client is making use of silence to reflect and think. As group members stand and place themselves on the spectrogram, their positions become visible for all to see. I then direct them to form pairs or triad groups with those standing adjacent to, or at opposite ends from, themselves. I invite them to share the reasons that led them to choose their positions on the continuum. The resonance of the ensuing discussion provides an audible measure of the intensity of involvement of the group members with both the activity and with one another (Bramley, 1979).

The Protagonists

In a typical role training session one individual is the protagonist for the group and comes forward onto the stage. This is the one who, as in ancient Greek drama, agonises on behalf of the group. Other group members are chosen to take up auxiliary roles. A brief enactment takes place in which the protagonist's functioning is displayed. The group leader provides a role analysis for the protagonist, identifying those aspects of roles that are adequate, overdeveloped, embryonic, conflicted or absent (Clayton, 1993).

I used to think in terms of one protagonist, the trainee interviewer. But since the scenario described above, I have found it useful to think in terms of two protagonists. This is a training group where both the interviewer and the interviewee are on stage. The interviewer is the learner to whom the interviewee brings a live, personal issue. Both are protagonists for the group in the learning that the group has come together to do because by definition, the protagonist is the one poised between the desire to learn and the fear of exposure (Baim et al., 2007). In the following sections I illustrate the way that I work with these two protagonists.

Producing the Enactment

In a role training session, the structure is provided by the arrangement of chairs. The audience sits in a semi-circle facing the open action space or stage area where the enactment takes place. Two chairs are placed in this space to represent the two participants in a counselling session. Trainees are invited to take up the roles of interviewer and interviewee, thus becoming the two protagonists for the group.

I coach the trainee interviewer to adopt the role of the *naïve inquirer*. The *naïve inquirer* works to understand the interviewee's worldview and the way that the interviewee experiences her or his own narrative. Rather than focusing on the actual words that are spoken, my coaching emphasises the importance of taking up an attitude of inquiry and involvement. I use techniques from the psychodramatic method (Baim et al., 2007; Blatner, 1988; Clayton, 1991; Leveton, 2001), such as sculpture, concretisation, doubling, mirroring, modelling, role reversal, coaching and vignette to facilitate the development of roles that can express this attitude.

Role Reversal

At the beginning of the interview the interviewee, as a protagonist for the group, expresses a concern. To facilitate role reversal, I may request that the interviewee stand aside for a moment and invite the interviewer to sit in the interviewee's chair. The focus is now on the interviewer as the protagonist for the group. I coach the interviewer to enter the inner world of the interviewee, to warm up to being in the interviewee's shoes, to imagine what it is like to be that person, to see the world as that person sees it. The interviewer can be powerfully affected by simply sitting in the interviewee's chair and imagining being the interviewee. It provides the freedom and mental space to come to know something about the interviewee's experience, both imaginatively and empathically. Once role reversed to the original positions again, the interviewer finds it possible to say something to the interviewee that captures more of a lived understanding of the interviewee's struggle.

The Sculpture

A sculpture is a tableaux that assists both interviewer and interviewee. It concretises in a visual scene the actors and elements that populate the interviewee's narrative. As with role reversal, creating and viewing a sculpture frees the interviewer from the tendency towards problem-solving and resorting to strategies, and promotes the development of empathy. Perhaps the interviewer has become conscious of a conflict in the relationship system that the interviewee is describing in words. The interviewer assists the interviewee to choose auxiliaries from the group to take up the roles of those involved in the conflict and place them in relation to one another. While assisting the interviewee to create the sculpture, the interviewer is coached to again adopt a naïve attitude. Together, the interviewer and interviewee view the tableaux. Both can be affected by it.

During earlier listening, the interviewer may have missed significant elements but while viewing the sculpture those elements may be revealed. The interviewer is then able to put into words a more accurate understanding of the interviewee's experience. Meanwhile, the interviewee is affected by the interviewer's consistent attempts to understand, and while viewing the sculpture with the interviewer becomes conscious of elements and conflicts that may have been outside awareness. Thus the possibility of further internal integration is created. In observing and participating in the creation of the sculpture, the other group members make progress in their own learning.

The Vignette

In psychodrama, a vignette is a brief psychodramatic enactment that displays the phenomenological world of the protagonist. I use the vignette to assist the interviewer-in-role-as-interviewee to imagine being the interviewee, to take on the role and to express what she or he believes the interviewee might express in this scene. At times a protagonist-interviewer may object, saying that she or he does not know. In response, I continue to use the different psychodramatic techniques to assist the interviewer to enter the system, to imagine her or himself in the role and to allow a response to emerge. This type of intervention tends to elicit the interviewer's spontaneity.

When the vignette is brought to a close and the protagonist returns to his or her role as counselling interviewer, a number of things have changed. The interviewer, in attempting to immerse him or herself in the interviewee's world, has come closer to adopting that naïve attitude of seeking to understand the interviewee's experience. Even if the interviewer has portrayed aspects of the system inaccurately, the interviewee is still positively affected. She or he has been present throughout, has reflected on the vignette and may have shifted in thinking and feeling. For the group members, the learning has come alive. They have all been intensely involved and are relating aspects of the work to their own development.

Working with Defensiveness in the Training Group

Students enter the counselling training course wanting to learn. Yet at another level of which they may be only vaguely, if at all, aware they are hoping that they already know

(Bramley, 1979; Salzberger-Wittenberg, Henry & Osborne, 1983). The wish to know already without the effort of learning, the wish to avoid appearing lacking or incompetent, the wish to avoid the pain of uncertainty and exposure, all contribute to student defensiveness.

Addressing the Need for Safety

Group members are more likely to go along with the group leader's requests, when the group leader can show how these are related to the purpose of the group (G.M. Clayton, personal communication, circa 1993). In the scene that opened this article, the training group's purpose is the learning of counselling and psychotherapy. As the group leader I relate all events in the group to this purpose. At the same time members of a learning group, like most groups in the early stages, have a need for security and safety (Bion, 1961). In my training groups I develop safety early on by working with the sociometry, that is, with how group members are connected to one another. I use a number of activities to build and strengthen the links between group members. Some are carried out in pairs or groups of four such as this task, "Share with your partner a time when you experienced being really listened to by someone".

Maintaining Connection

Defensiveness can arise from many sources. In the scene described at the beginning of this paper the interviewer, the interviewee and many group members warmed up to defended roles. In my view they experienced a threat that was prompted by my losing connection with the protagonist-interviewee. As discussed above, since that group session I have conceptualised the role training session as involving three protagonists. I emphasise the need for the trainer to maintain connection with all three, interviewer, interviewee and audience. In a parallel process, my interventions as group leader come now from the attitude of trying to understand the interviewer's conceptualisation of the interviewee's worldview. This stance has increased the support experienced by both interviewer and interviewee. It is protective of both and promotes learning for all.

The Focal Conflict Model

So far the role training method described here encompasses two protagonists, interviewer and interviewee, and works to resolve defensiveness and other conflicts that arise for them during training sessions. I am grateful to a now deceased colleague and friend for suggesting that the group itself is the third protagonist (Sandra Russell, personal communication, 2008). The focal conflict model offers a way to understand, track and work with the defensiveness that tends to emerge during learning in this third protagonist, the training group (Bramley, 1979; Whitaker, 1985). According to this theory, there will exist in each of the group members an unconscious wish, the disturbing motive. In reaction to this wish, there arises a fear, the reactive motive. Applied to the group process, everything a group member says or does is understood as connected in some way to the unconscious wish or fear.

Freud (1957, 1958) theorised that the conflict between the wish and the unacceptable

nature of the wish gave rise to the symptom. It was the symptom that his patients brought to him for treatment. The conflict between the disturbing motive and the reactive motive leads to a resolution, that is, the group tacitly agree on a group norm. The theory predicts that the group's resolution will be either an enabling or a restrictive group norm. In a restrictive resolution, the wish is sacrificed to the fear. In an enabling resolution, the fear is addressed and the wish is satisfied.

Whitaker and Lieberman (2008) illustrated the focal conflict in the process of a therapy group. In their example, they identified the disturbing motive as the wish for each group member to have a special place with the group leader. The reactive motive that arose in response to this disturbing motive was the fear that any attempt to be special to the group leader would elicit rivalry from the other group members, who would then attack. The group came to a restrictive resolution, agreement that they should all be treated alike. The wish of the disturbing motive was sacrificed for the safety of a restrictive resolution. Freud interpreted unconscious conflicts, bringing them to the patient's awareness. He might have seen Whitaker's and Lieberman's example as an attempt to deal with the feelings of rivalry aroused by the Oedipal conflict. So too can the group leader name a restrictive resolution. This brings it to the attention of the group members and provides them with the possibility of revising the group norm.

Working with the Focal Conflict Model

The focal conflict model thus provides the group leader with a way of making sense of developments and remaining oriented to the group process (Bramley, 1979; Whitaker, 1985). In the sharing phase of the role training session described in the paper's opening, a group member exclaims that we are "picking at scabs". While this comment may be interpreted a number of ways, one possibility is to view it as an expression of defensiveness. In terms of the focal conflict model he is expressing the reactive motive, a fear of exposure, of revealed vulnerability, to use his metaphor of being made to re-injure oneself and bleed in public. He is the spokesperson for others who also experience the reactive motive strongly. In doing so he represents a point on a continuum of defensiveness that exists in every member of the group. Group members could place themselves on this continuum, from a point of high defensiveness to a point where defensiveness is minimal.

In the discussion that follows the sharing, comments from some group members indicate that the reactive fear was strong and the tendency to respond defensively was a group issue. Nevertheless, since the group as a whole avoided enacting a restrictive resolution, the disturbing motive, the wish to reveal self and be vulnerable, was strong. The group leader needs to work with the defences that arise in the training group in response to the threat of exposure. In this illustration, the threat experienced by the group members may have been prompted by my loss of connection with the interviewee. Such threats arouse fears that are both conscious and unconscious.

At the conscious level they may have more to do with fears of exposure, criticism, embarrassment, appearing incompetent and a loss of self-esteem. All are painful feelings that interfere with learning. At an unconscious level, they may have more to do with

eliciting the implicit and non-verbal experiences of shame and those primitive persecutory feelings of fear for one's survival so evocatively described by Klein (1975). These early fears may be for the continued integrity of one's sense of self, fears of such intensity that the fears themselves are attacking the capacity of the ego to tolerate the experience.

Conclusion

This paper opened with an illustrative scene, a moment in my leadership of a training group for counsellor trainees. From this I have drawn three strands to weave together reflections about my use of a role training approach in the teaching of counselling. The first strand focused on the need to develop ways to assist trainees to develop empathy, a naïve attitude and the ability to enter into the experience of their clients. In the second strand I described my use of Moreno's role training method, including my adaptation of the method to maintain a link with both the trainee-interviewer and the trainee-interviewee as two protagonists, and the training group as the third protagonist. I have found that pausing the interview to work with the interviewer assists the learning for all involved. The third strand focused on the way I work with defensiveness that tends to emerge in the training group. I have described how I address the need for safety and connection, and my use of the focal conflict model to make sense of the group process in terms of wish and fear.

Counselling is art and counsellors get better at it by learning from their clients. So it is with teachers. In reflecting on and writing about that group session, I learnt much from my students and I have presented here the kernels of that learning.

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