

Original theory of co-counselling & the paradigm shift

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A talk by John Heron given at Co-counselling International Teachers meeting at Harlech, Wales, on 28 July 1995. The talk was a response to the following question:

'What is your account of the original theory of co-counselling & how has this changed in the paradigm shift?'

Please note that in writing up my answer from notes kindly provided by Bobby, Breda and Julian, I have elaborated on the paradigm shift, its nature and applications, so you will find more than in the original talk.

The original theory

1. The original theory has an entirely positive view of human potential, especially human intelligence, the capacity of mind to discriminate what's happening and evolve an appropriate response. All negative behaviour is entirely due to this positive potential being interfered with. Aggression is reactive, due to frustration and repression of the positive. It is not innate, as Freud believed, also the ethologist Konrad Lorenz.
2. Emotional pain is the primary interference with positive potential. And the primary source of human pain is parents oppressing and hurting children. This interrupts their capacity to discriminate what is happening in the world around and creatively form an adaptive response. The parents oppressor's behaviour is recorded in the child victim's mind, together with the child's desperate and inevitably ineffective survival response, all held in place, fixated, by emotional pain. Any similar future experience can trigger the whole or part of this recording, either the oppressor end or the victim's maladaptive reaction or both. The immediate precursor to this view was the theory of the emotional engram and the reactive mind in Hubbard's dianetics.
3. A pattern is the tendency to keep replaying in current behaviour part of the whole of the old recording. It is compulsive, that is, distress-driven; it is relatively unaware; and it is always maladaptive. It is of two kinds. An intermittent pattern distorts behaviour from time to time, triggered by some specific stimulus in environment, such as a particular thing an authority figure says or does. A chronic pattern is at work pretty well all the time, since it has become part of one's identity, a persistent negative self-image, which subtly or obviously restricts and distorts all behaviour. A pattern is a continually misapplied, maladaptive and irrelevant coping mechanism; a desperate attempt to resolve the trauma of the past by intermittently or continuously re-enacting it in the present.
4. The basis pattern has an oppressor-victim polarity, and internal-external polarity. So you can be both oppressor and victim within yourself in relation to yourself. And you can also act out these distressed roles in relations with other people and the wider world, being compulsive victim or oppressor or switching between the two, in relation with others who are locked in dovetailing patterns. There is an ancillary rebel-rescuer polarity, the oscillation between compulsive ineffective attempts to rebel against the oppressor and to rescue the

victim. And these roles too be taken up internally within the self, or externally in relation with others. This ancillary polarity was not in the original theory.

5. Through the process of emotional discharge in co-counselling, when the client is in touch with distress and also has some attention free of it, the old pain which keeps the pattern running is released. And with this release, occluded intelligence re-awakens, the fine wheels of the mind start to spin again, enabling us to see the original situation as it really was, to re-evaluate it, so that we are no longer in the grip of its fixated oppressor-victim belief system.

6. The goal of the original theory is to liberate occluded intelligence, through discharge and re-evaluation, from the fixated crippled perspectives of the hurt child. And so to become progressively more and more rational in all areas of life. It is also part of the original theory that rational, distress-free thinking, not feeling of any kind, is the only proper guide to action.

7. Applied to society, the original theory holds that certain oppressions play a key role in society in relation to other oppressions. Jackins singles out the oppression of young people by adults as the foundation for the installation of all other patterns of oppression. He also picks out the oppression of the working class as central and theorises that all other oppressions - gender, age, race, physical disability, size, handicap, sex preference, religion, nationality, culture, language - are developed to divide the working class against each other and secure their compliance with their exploitation.

8. This last point leads into the main social aspect of the theory. This is that those who have internalised early external oppression will oppress other people who have been similarly oppressed. In other words, you act out the internalised oppressor by oppressing other victims, just as your external oppressor picked on you. So oppressed minorities will oppress each other. This is true of children who due to their own oppression oppress other children. And it carries right on into adulthood.

9. The original theory distinguished between nonsexual nurturance needs for physical contact, and sexual needs. It argued that sexual attraction can be distorted both in its direction and intensity by hidden distress, and proposed a rule that such attraction between people meeting as co-counsellors should always be counselled on and never acted on.

10. Some of the limitations of the original theory are:

- It is clearly false that rational thought alone, without regard to feeling is a proper guide to action. Rational thought without empathy and felt attunement to the situation is disastrous.
- It is clearly not the case that sustained discharge is the only or even the primary way of releasing increased capacity for rational thinking. It is just one way.
- It is not clear that sustained discharge is the only or even the primary way of breaking up chronic patterns. It is contributory.
- Marx's ideas about class structure, and his vision for the working class, are no longer relevant in the modern world, and to use them as a basis for social liberation is just to impose another form of oppression.
- The whole theory is a form of humanism, and gives a very limited and superficial account of human nature. It has no reference to imagination and the depths of the imaginal mind; to higher intuitive processes; to psychic capacities and altered state of consciousness; to

spiritual, religious, mystical experience. The practice of co-counselling neither utilises, nor provides an outlet for, these deep potentials of the human being.

- The original theory has never had a satisfactory account, nor indeed any thoroughgoing account, of what it is that starts the whole business of social oppression, of people hurting people.

The paradigm shift

1. The original theory holds that there are three root causes of human distress: ignorance, natural disaster and social oppression. But it doesn't have much more to say than that, which is very unsatisfactory and where it has no real foundation. Now if social oppression is a cause all on its own and is itself uncaused, then this simply means people are innately nasty, they hurt each other because they are naturally destructive. And if this is the case, discharge may clear up the hurt caused by destructive behaviour. But it won't affect the destructive behaviour itself, because this is innate, it isn't itself based on hurt.

2. In any case, I don't accept the innate nastiness theory of human behaviour, for a strongly paradoxical reason. People can be so horrible to each other, that it can only be explained in terms of something profoundly positive having been deeply assaulted, frustrated and damaged.

3. So we need to explain why people hurt people in terms of some other cause. Natural disasters is certainly plausible. People can be overwhelmed with the distress of various natural calamities, beyond their ability to process the distress, and then displace it onto each other in various forms of distorted behaviour. I accept this as a cause, and that for such distress, the process of discharge and re-evaluation may well be healing. However, I don't think it is a sufficient explanation on its own. There is something which is much more telling.

4. This is human ignorance. Human beings are only programmed with a few basic physiological reflexes. All the information and the skills they need for survival and for personal and social development have to be acquired through learning. The absence of adequate information and skills is not only distressing in itself, it is going to lead to consequences for oneself and others that can be very distressing. So innate ignorance is one of my prime contenders for the explanation of why people hurt people. Their ignorance relative to the information and skill they really need, piles up distress to the point of overload, and then they blindly take it out on each other. This launches social oppression, which then piles socially imposed ignorance on top of innate ignorance, and the whole sorry saga unfolds.

5. Now discharge and re-evaluation may well heal the hurt caused by social oppression, and also the underlying hurt caused by ignorance. But since the ignorance is not itself rooted in hurt, but is innate, no amount of discharge is going to deal with it. In other words, once I have got rid of the pain and frustration I feel at my lack of information and skill, I am still staring that lack in the face again. And if that lack wasn't enough before the pain started to prompt me into creative problem-solving, there is no reason to suppose it will be after the pain is healed.

6. The rock-bottom cure for ignorance is creative problem-solving and education. Someone somewhere must have just the right amount of lack of information for it to be felt as a spur to creative problem-solving, rather than as a debilitating source of distress. Once this person

has solved the problem and acquired relevant information and skill, then he or she can educate others so that they can overcome the same kind of ignorance.

7. Now I think this principle holds universally, long after my first hypothetical problemsolver got the point, and whatever complicated entanglements of ignorance and social oppression there are. For any oppressed group, the root problem is lack of information and skill. And this needs to be dealt with first, through basic problem-solving, education and training, about how to live effectively in relation to their prevailing situation. And first and foremost this is about coping with the physical world, the dynamics of the surrounding culture and each other, not about coping with their distress feelings. That comes in a further and later stage of development.

8. This kind of ignorance is what I call external ignorance. It is about coping in the physical and social world. But there is another kind of ignorance, which I call internal ignorance. This is not so much ignorance as a form of deep amnesia, a forgetting who I really am. And this is where we get to the core of the paradigm shift. Who I really am is a divine being with a limitless capacity for expanded awareness and charismatic abundance. Somewhere in my being I know this and somehow in my being I have become nescient, not knowing it, or, which is more to the point, somehow I have forgotten it.

9. This kind of internal ignorance, this inner nescience, can generate a deep and subtle sort of distress, a profound *angst*, which, if it is not recognised for what it is, can displace into the distresses of external ignorance and social oppression endlessly prolonging them and their effects, or translating them into new forms and configurations.

10. Once again, the primary solution to internal ignorance is awakening, inward remembering and recall, solving the problem through recognition of the divine image within, the *imago dei*, deep within the psyche. We need the awakening myth, the greater story, that I came here and forgot whence I came. Then it is some form of education and training, whether self-directed and designed, or through some peer group or school of practice, that gives space for the divine being within gently to emerge.

11. This gentle and imperceptible emergence of the divine being within, through appropriate openness, is a transformation of personal being, which is also a transmutation of distress emotion. Recovering spiritual identity, and the expanded awareness that goes with it, generates higher frequency energy in the psyche which transmutes distress, that is, changes its frequency, turns base metal into gold.

12. But there are limits to this process. Every level of being needs honouring in its own terms. Personal pain needs dealing with at the level at which it happened. So personal catharsis, the discharge of pain, is the foundation work, the precursor to transpersonal transmutation. The latter presupposes the primary and ongoing work of the former. Otherwise the transmutation process will not reach deep enough into the personal distress, which can then distort the whole spiritual process, making it dissociated and perhaps repressive. So personal catharsis of distress grounds and supports transpersonal transmutation of distress. They are complementary.

13. I think it is true that discharge at the personal level can take us to the brink of spiritual awakening, because it clears out of the way the emotional debris that is piled up over the place of potential inner opening to the divine being within. But there is a bit of a paradox here, because the inner *angst* at being cut off from this indwelling spirit, if it is not seen for

what it is, can keep being displaced into and compounding personal distress. So just as ordinary discharge gets one to the brink of awakening, if I'm part of a co-counselling culture that doesn't acknowledge the brink, then I unawaresly back away from it, which generates more *angst* to inflate everyday distress.

14. Transmutation processes are already at work in co-counselling. The intense spiritual activity of giving attention through the gaze, is a deep interpersonal meditation or spiritual practice, which is subtly transmutative of distress for both the giver and the receiver. The symbolism of collective ritual, as in opening and closing circles for celebration, moving, singing, simple enactments (passing round a flower or key with a declaration) creates a subtle shift of consciousness with an energetic field that is transmutative.

15. So the paradigm shift is quite simple. It is about awakening to one's spiritual identity, cultivating it and manifesting it; and about grounding emotional transmutation through transpersonal practices in emotional discharge through personal counselling. It is about an open spirituality which transmutes and does not repress pain; and about a grounding humanity that releases its pain and does not inflate pain by repressing its spirituality.

Some elaborations of the paradigm shift

1. According to the old theory, the experience of emotional hurt interrupts the normal creative adaptive response of our intelligence, gets it stuck in a distorted and desperate survival view; and the process of discharging the distress allows it to get unstuck and to become flexible and discriminating again, re-evaluating what happened. I think this is true as far as it goes, but it doesn't go far enough. It's a relatively superficial account.
2. The more profound account is that emotional hurt causes distress to contract around a deep place within us where we feel empathy, attunement, resonance, an atoneness with people, nature, the universe, and our own indwelling spirit, our inherent divinity. This capacity for feeling at one with things and our own deep divinity, underlies our intuitive appraisal of situations and our ability for intelligent, rational discrimination. So emotional hurt doesn't just get our intelligent responsiveness stuck, it goes deeper: it contracts our intuitive embrace of situations and deeper still it afflicts and curtails our capacity for feeling resonance and attunement with the world, and openness to our indwelling spirit.
3. So when teaching co-counselling, on this view, we need to teach that the purpose of emotional discharge is (1) to set the fine wheels of our discriminating intelligence spinning again; (2) to release our intuitive, imaginative grasp of our world; and most of all (3) to liberate our ability to feel attuned with our world and our inner divinity, our inner capacity for expanded and comprehensive awareness and charismatic abundance.
4. Also on this kind of view, we need to teach the idea of Simple Awakening, so that when people discharge themselves to the brink of, when they remove the debris from, the place within where they can feel attuned to the world without and the divinity within, they are ready to acknowledge that place, and Awake with celebration and affirmation of it, and maybe there will also be some intermittent discharge of the *angst* of having been cut off from it.
5. Then again, on this view, we need a whole complementary dynamic, which, from the very beginning of a fundamental course, invites people to use Awakening affirmations, rituals and other practices, so they reach down to evoke growth from the deep centre within.

6. This all about descent spirituality, reaching downward and inward to the indwelling spirit. It is the complement to ascent spirituality, which is about reaching upward and outward to a transcending spirit. We have had a lot of the latter over the last two thousand years, often in very distorted, oppressive and patriarchal forms. We are now due for some of the former, and eventually some wholesome integration of the two.

7. Also on the new paradigm view, we need to teach the creative outward expression, in relationships and in social transformation, of this inner liberated place of feeling inner and outer attunement. Social action is then grounded in inner opening and awakening. If it isn't grounded on inner awakening, it can be distorted by the displaced *angst* of not being awakened.

8. And we need to teach social action in terms of creating social alternatives, of creating the new society rather than opposing the old. If we put all our energy into opposing the rigidity and oppressing of the old society, our radical identity becomes parasitic on what it opposes; we are defined by the evil we condemn; we feed off the energy of what we resist; we slip into the distressed place of compulsive rebel, re-enacting the child's ineffective rebellion against overwhelming odds. So we need to teach the value of drawing energy from a positive future, bringing a new society, a self-generating culture into being, one that is continually innovative in shaping every aspect of social life.

Even within the most rigid social structures, there are always alternative spaces for innovation. Fear keeps everyone inside the structure on the rigid grid of what its oppression allows. Fear keeps people from seeing the spaces between the fear constrained lines of the grid. The challenge is to dissociate from the fear, learn to see the spaces, and plant flowers in them. If you choose the biggest spaces, no-one stuck on the grid can allow themselves to believe that such big openings exist, so you get a head start with your flower-planting. Modern society as a whole is only a relatively rigid structure. There are large spaces for flower-planting.

9. When I say in several of the above paragraphs 'We need to teach', I only mean those of us who feel in our bones as well as our heads that something like the spiritual core account of human beings is a good one. The proposals are only suggestions, and indicate no more than the sort of thing I will be doing in this area. There is no question of imposing this on CCI or anyone, anywhere.

It is entirely a matter of personal integrity, of what you and I as teachers feel we need to do to be true to ourselves, to our deep beliefs and experiences. In CCI we need not simply to have a tolerance of both humanist and posthumanist versions of co-counselling theory and practice. We need to have a loving celebration of our differences in this area. And here I really do mean 'we need' in the general sense of 'we'. Teachers can only teach what in all conscience they can teach, and this is a matter for positive affirmation and delight. Let CCI be a place where differences of conscience are fully respected and honoured.

John Heron, November 1995