

Many Stories to Tell: Response to the Biogram

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There is nothing more challenging in the field of counselling than working crossculturally, in that the practitioner is forced to confront his or her own framework of assumptions, at the personal, professional, social and the cultural levels. For the person who moves between one culture and another, there is nothing more challenging than the act of migration itself, with its attendant losses and adjustments. These two areas of experience come together in attempting to provide a counselling service for refugees which is meaningful for them as well as for the practitioners.

It is as well to remember that the roots of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy are in Europe and, as Littlewood says,

A psychotherapy which was able to ignore social contexts in favour of intrapsychic factors alone was clearly safer for the practitioner, and helped establish psychoanalysis as a universal (and thus 'scientific') process ... (2000: 8).

From this process have arisen, as the authors of this article point out, 'dominant professional discourses and classification systems' that 'emphasise 'trauma', 'dependency' and 'powerlessness' (Littlewood, 2000). In the work with displaced people, the weight of these discourses and classification systems can be overwhelming and self-defeating if they do not take account of the lived experience of those affected and the cultural frameworks in which they occur.

In this article the authors, in their work with displaced people in Colombia, describe an attempt to redress the balance through the use of the biogram. Instead of classification, they are focused on interpretation, on making meaning of human experience through the lenses of both the one who experiences and the one who witnesses.


In our work with refugee survivors of torture and trauma in Queensland, we find it useful to adopt a similar approach and to engage in dialogue with our clients so that we may begin to understand the significances which they attribute to their experience, alongside the significances which we as counsellors may tend to perceive. In this way we have come to see our clients as survivors rather than victims, and have

begun to learn something about resiliency in the face of adversity. We have also learned something about the value of relationship in providing a professional service and of the importance of curiosity as a tool.

People from eastern Africa, who constitute the largest group of incoming refugees to Australia at this point, do not understand the European concept of counselling, and Eurocentric classification systems have little relevance to them. They do, however, have many stories to tell, stories which reveal their world-views, their aspirations and their pains. For many, it seems, the trauma is in the here and now, rather than what may have happened before they arrived here.

The value in the work presented in this article is in its attempt to find a practical way of working which incorporates both 'internal' and 'external' understandings of displacement, its allocation of equal weight to the perspectives of both client and service provider and its focus on dialogue rather than treatment. Its weakness, ironically, is that, in its appeal to the canons of science, it has based its results on a small sample. The biogram is valuable in that it provides a clear, evidence based picture of research data, which enables the reader to make comparisons easily through the colour codes and to make sense of the results in general. As a graphic representation, it has the capacity engage the interest immediately and can be followed up by more detailed case-by-case analysis should this be required. It is therefore well placed to engage the interest of the 'scientific community'.

Reference

Littlewood, R., 2000. *Towards an Intercultural Therapy*. In J. Kareem & R. Littlewood (Eds), *Intercultural Therapy*, Oxford, Blackwell Science. 

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