

Researching Moslem–Christian Marriages: Extrapolating From Mixed-Faith Couples Towards the Practices of *Convivencia*

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Moslem–Christian marriage can be seen as a kind of ‘testing place’ for examining and appreciating the practices of difference. This article offers a summary from a recent local research project which investigated these relationships (Ata, 2003). The empirical data from the study was ‘milled’ for its potential to inform practice, a process that generated four themes that practitioners may find useful in their attempts to design practice approaches that are sensitive to alternative anthropologies. Beginning from the contention that the otherness of those for whom we work can be a mirror for our own cultural and practice assumptions, we extrapolate from these themes to practise with other examples of diversity. It is argued that our efforts to practise with diverse populations will be unengaging, even colonising, unless we are able to denaturalise our own positions.

Few practitioners meet with Moslem–Christian couples presenting for marital work. More likely, but still infrequently, practitioners may have contact with one, or both, parties in a mixed-faith relationship in relation to practical matters around children, ageing parents, or for a particular problem of living. With such limited direct relevance, why might a paper on marriages between people of a Christian and an Islamic faith be of interest? We believe there are several good reasons that go beyond the likelihood of the practitioner having direct contact with mixed-faith couples.

One reason an examination of Moslem–Christian marriage might be useful is that it may offer a special kind of test site for examining and appreciating the practices of difference. That there is a potential for conflict in how the matter of difference is played out is highlighted by the long and often troubled history in the conjunction of Moslems and Christians as it is currently seen in our currently contested international politics (Wheatcroft, 2003). In engaging with this matter of difference at the local, interpersonal level,

one is able to observe and actively consider a complex set of dynamics: how intimate relations exchange with the geopolitics of difference; how allegiance to the spiritual coexists with the daily demands of practicality and compromise; how the private and public interpenetrate and jostle. Even at a distance of one remove it follows that a consideration of such marriages offers practitioners a stimulating milieu for active listening and professional curiosity.

A second reason for a reflective engagement with this example of ‘diversity-in-play’ is that it offers practitioners a mirror upon which our own particularity is made clearer to us. Specifically, if we hold the other’s reality as normal rather than as different and noteworthy, we act to denaturalise the cultural assumptions and embeddedness of ourselves as practitioners and as cultural representatives. In saying this, we are mindful that the practitioner may not view themselves as being mainstream — spiritually, sexually, ethnically, and so forth — whether this difference or differences of the practitioner from the putative ‘Anglo’ mainstream is common to, or antagonistic to, the otherness of the client. For example, a lesbian practitioner may be, and may see herself as ‘other’, yet this alternative status should be understood within the



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context of this woman's educational status, her occupation of a formal role, that she may be Caucasian, and so forth.

That noted, we would still assume that the practitioner is likely to have naturalised, to have internalised, key assumptions and customs — what Bourdieu (1977) has called the *habitus* — associated with one's belonging to a particular professional-therapeutic grouping. This 'belonging' is, in and of itself, quite properly a subject for review, as it is likely to obscure much that is problematic. For example, our capacity to acknowledge our relative power and privilege is diminished by the culture found in the helping professions that assumes that what we know and what we do is enlightened and progressive, or at the worst, benign.

If a radical denaturalising can be engineered, it is possible to imagine it is 'us', not 'them', that is seen as, in the words of an apocryphal migrant to Australia, 'the weird mob' (O'Grady, 1964). This is an important aspiration, but it is always difficult for us, as cultural and as professional subjects, to be aware of our own idiosyncrasies, our own strangeness, as well as our imperialism. This blindness has been analogously described by Barthes when he observes:

(Charlie) Chaplin ... shows the public its blindness by presenting at the same time (on a stage) a man who is blind and what is in front of him. To see someone who does not see is the best way to be intensively aware of what he does not see (1973: 44).

McIlwaine suggests that

a therapist needs consciously to interrogate her own relationship with culture and identity, otherwise she could seal herself off inside the dominant western imperatives (believing) herself to be *culture-less*' (2002: 18).

Similarly, rather than practitioners seeking to be the expert on 'the other' by reading books on Islam, doing courses on crosscultural therapy — consuming the texts that teach what we might call *otherology* — it is preferable to be animated by the belief that practice with diverse clients puts our selves, our professions and our broader culture on notice. In such a viewing place it is clearer what is contingent in our received practices which denaturalise much that we may have taken for granted. Engaging in this figure-groundshift is not an academic exercise but offers the practitioner pragmatic challenges and the opportunity for growth. Unlike the approach taken in 'liberal' educational texts (such as Waddy, 1991), which tend to objectify and stereotype otherness for consumption by the less knowing expert, the starting point for the current project is one that

seeks to contest the liberal premise that 'we' can find out more about 'them'. We argue that it is 'Anglo' culture that is often singular and anomalous (Said, 1978) and we offer reference points that can be used to denaturalise our own assumptions, language habits and implicit role positions.

The Current Exercise

With the above as background, this paper sets out to offer a novel, albeit preliminary, contribution. In the first instance the paper has both a research base and a practice focus. That is, the primary author brings to the current project recently finalised research which focused on collecting and analysing the responses of a sample of Australian couples where one party has a self-declared Moslem faith and the other a Christian faith (Ata, 2003). The second author, who has an extensive background in teaching and practice, undertook the task of 'milling' the products of the empirical research, processing it for what might relate to practice.

Yet what began as a narrow and focused review seemed to grow, to have broader implications, as by their very character each cross-religious marriage was like a busy and diverse meeting place. In some important ways it seemed that processes and possibilities found in this specific location might have a relevance to other meeting points in the cross-flows of difference. Perhaps interfaith intimate 'congregations' could be regarded as emblematic as test sites, may even be symbols of hope and potential in our espousedly diverse, but increasingly convergent, society. This idea led us to consider our material for its broader relevance to the larger, anthropologically-oriented project of 'work with diverse populations' (Seeley, 2004).

In what follows there are three sections. First, there is a summary of the research process and of the project's key findings, namely that six distinguishable patterns of adaptation were reported by the interviewees to the demands of their interfaith marriages. Second, four themes-about-difference derived from this empirical data are presented as reference points for practitioners in deliberations about how they might design their approaches to practice. These themes are (1) differences in how the 'private and the public' divide is understood in Christian and Moslem conceptions of marriage; (2) the differing views participants, including the worker, may operate from concerning understandings of identity and selfhood; (3) the complex question of alignment, particular with respect to gender and how this may interact with power and hierarchy, and (4) variations with respect to communicational directness (specifically should potentially inflaming differences be

addressed directly or reframed and normalised?). A final section extrapolates from these themes towards the broader consideration of practices that build and sustain *'convivencia'* — the motif of living well with difference, of holding against all forms of hegemony, of quietly resisting the reductive violence of both convergence and conflict.

The Research

The Research Project

Intermarriage can be characterised in a number of ways. For example, differing ethnicity, language, birthplace, race and status have been used as defining characteristics of intermarriage, particularly between host and immigrant groups (Penny & Khoo, 1996). For the purposes of the study, the defining characteristic of intermarriage was religious affiliation, specifically where one party was Christian and the other Moslem. This particular example of intermarriage overlaps with those based on contrasts of ethnicity, language, race or culture (Loewenberg, 1988). One reason for focusing on religion is the argument (though certainly contestable) that guidelines for relationships are more clearly and explicitly defined by religious doctrine than by other aspects of culture (Caltabiano, 1985).

In order to examine this, an empirical project was designed. Data was derived from face-to-face interviews. The sample was drawn from the state of Victoria and excluded arranged, mail-order and 'shotgun' marriages. Inclusion was on the basis of self-defined theological identity, not the frequency with which participants observed religious rites and celebrations. One hundred and six people from 20 countries of birth were interviewed.

Further description of the sample, such as respective educational and employment status, patterns of 'drift' for partners into their spouse's religious affiliation, birthplace and so on are detailed elsewhere (Ata, 2003).

TABLE 1

Participants in the Study

	Males		Females	
Moslems	44	Moslems	33	
Christians	19	Christian	10	
Total	63		43	

With its focus on inter-faith marriages, the initial research concentrated upon:

- A literature review of changing traditions, roles and practices of the family within ethnic and mainstream societies
- Direct interviews of participants on marriage, identity, religious affiliation, and attitudes to children.

Most questions were closed, with a minority open-ended. A convenience sampling procedure was adopted.

Key Findings: Patterns of Response in Interfaith Marriages

Like any set of people who have to live with difference and diversity, couples in mixed-faith relationships report contending with many challenges. These include tense reactions from relatives and friends; becoming the focus for community concern; and the matter of confronting apparently incompatible religious expectations. Respondents also reported a number of positive outcomes; for example, that dealing well with religious differences can act to strengthen relationships. More generally, reading across the data, it appeared that there were discernible patterns in how couples evolved with respect to accommodating their different faiths. Sometimes these patterns seemed well thought through; sometimes interviewees reported patterns with mixed, even contradictory, features; and sometimes the reported pattern did not seem to acknowledge that there were multiple points of view. The six identified patterns are:

- 1. Conversion or annexation:** This is where one party converts to the faith of the other. This was reported as either a positive and progressive choice or a kind of co-option or annexation.
- 2. Ignoring or withdrawing:** Here both parties withdrew from organised religious activities and enacted a de facto policy of ignoring — literally not speaking about — the question of religious difference.
- 3. An active policy espousing a plurality of faiths:** Some couples adopted an explicit policy of religious pluralism, perhaps attending services in turn or adopting an and/both pattern.
- 4. Compromising and negotiating:** This is a radical pattern where both parties leave their religion of origin and take up an 'in-between' allegiance.
- 5. Pastoral/ecumenical yielding:** Some couples actively attempted to 'merge' the rites and practices of their different faiths in the home. This may be done to a greater or lesser extent.

6. Respect for 'otherness': Unlike (3) above, some parties worked to practise a respect for difference, neither attempting to co-opt, nor minimise differences.

A fuller account of these patterns can be inspected (Ata, 2003). Although one might wonder if the above patterns might be characteristic of the range of adaptation styles found in other fields, a brief commentary on these patterns from the perspective of a practitioner is set out below.

Implications for Practice

Practitioners who have contact with parties in a mixed-faith relationship may find it helpful to review the above styles of adaptation and use the material as starting points for discussion. For example: 'What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of "withdrawing and ignoring"?'; 'Do you see that you and your partner have a way of doing things that is similar to this pattern of "withdrawing and ignoring"? It could be expected that each of these styles of adaptation has benefits and drawbacks. It was also clear that additional challenges to be managed arise with respect to unexpected crises, expected family life cycle transition points, and the obligation to observe key religious events. Distinct from these patterns, in considering these broader data from the interviews, four themes were identified from a practice-oriented reflection on the data that practitioners might find useful as references points in constructing their approach to practice.

Views on Marriage: Differences in How the 'Private and the Public' Boundary Is Understood and Regulated

Often reported in the interviews was that participants thought Moslem marriages are more of a public matter than are Christian understandings of marriage. Mindful that this should not be understood as a rigid generalisation, that it may not be relevant to any one particular relationship, this description is consistent with much that is offered in practice, as well as more autobiographical texts (McGoldrick, Pearce & Giordano, 1996; Said, 2000) and will be examined at some length, as it raises considerable emotion and controversy. Controversy arises particularly with respect to two key contests: first, the matter of patriarchy and sexism; and second, differences in received notions of the primacy of the marriage — that is, the 'each couple is a distinct unit' versus 'the couple is a component of a larger group.'

Examples of this contest are:

- if a couple are 'at odds', is this something a father-in-law should know of, even arbitrate about, or would this be an inappropriate intrusion?
- should a daughter tell her mother that her husband is a gambler, is impotent, violent or unfaithful?
- is it shaming to a whole 'clan' if a couple wish to talk to a counsellor about a problem they might be having?

Since all marital unions entail multiple stakeholders and third parties, it is a mistake to believe that Christian marriages do not have a public dimension. It could be that the exchanges between the public and the private in Christian marriages are as present as in Moslem marriages, but are more opaque and are less *overtly* aligned with the apparent interests of males. Clearly, this is not purely a religious matter, and overlaps with geographical, historical and cultural factors. What is at issue for our current purposes is not *whether* there are exchanges between public and private dimensions in both codes. Rather, what may be experienced as difficult to those in interfaith unions are divergences with respect to the assumptions that govern the circumstances that license a 'crossover' between the subsystems of the private with the public. Not only may each group interpret different matters as legitimate or illegitimate or as prompts for public scrutiny, they may also expect to employ different mechanisms for resolving these matters.

Questions that link gender roles with marriage are often in play here. In this matter, religion and culture are closely entwined and they together make a 'hinge' — a decision point — that swings the doors of the respective subsystems open or shut. The content of the relevant beliefs can be emotive, as matters such as sexual faithfulness, infertility and domestic violence are highly symbolic. An acute awareness of the variable ways of defining the public/private divide may be orienting, even provocatively so, to practitioners. For example, contrary to our Western view, it can be seen as progressive that the boundary around a marriage is *not* assumed to be 'private and confidential', as a semi-permeable boundary can assist accountability in the respective behaviour of the participants. Similarly, an interest in broadening the boundary around 'the work' between practitioners and their clients may also be useful to consider (Wirtz & Schweitzer, 2003; Evans & Harris, 2004).

Understandings of Identity and the Self

Although it was not featured as a particular topic in the specific questions that were asked in the survey, a

theme that arose in the responses was that many respondents particularly valued honour and reputation, and were aversive to shame and ostracism; that is, many respondents, both Moslem and Christian, seemed to be collectively oriented people who were sensitive to the quality of their interrelatedness (Dumont, 1986). Unlike the differences the research identified in assumptions about the public/private divide, which tended to be aligned with religious identification, both sets of respondents could be said to contest the assumption that the self is an island, that each person is sovereign and rightfully self-determining. It appears that interdependence was characteristic of the 'lived experience' (Schutz, 1972) of respondents.

This is a major issue for practitioners, as current counselling and mental health practice, like Western culture in general, tend to be premised on a supposedly inviolate — but in fact highly problematic — assumption that individuals are sovereign, unitary subjects, as Paterson (1996) has pointed out. This assumption is problematic for two reasons. First, practitioners and participants may not share the same assumption. Second, if the practitioner does take the Western view that assumes self-actualisation as the highest form of human need, this affects how normality and well-being will be constructed: the well-adjusted will be 'differentiated', 'individuated', 'self-determining', while the poorly adjusted will be 'undifferentiated', 'fused' and 'dependent'. Such constructions have particular consequences; for example, in disqualifying the importance of relationships and context in the construction, maintenance and evolution of identity. In turn, given this taxonomy, practitioners will be motivated to, and have techniques for, adjusting their clients so that these persons will be made to have firmer boundaries, be more self-managing, less prone to guilt, find personal fulfilment, and so forth. Unlike the position taken by mainstream counselling theorists that it is only 'some non-Western cultures (who) focus on interdependence (and) downplay individualism' (Corey, Corey & Callanan, 1998: 196), it seems more likely that it is Western ideology that is ethically, historically, culturally and statistically anomalous (Heelas & Locke, 1981; Furlong, 2003).

There are, of course, interpenetrations between religion and culture in how the self is understood, as this matter can never be simply related to religion. For example, Webb (2002: 17) notes the presence of child-rearing practices in Chinese and Latino families that are organised to promote 'interdependence rather than individual autonomy'. Williams-Gray argues that 'The role of positive kinship networks and extended

families exemplify the we-versus-I value system among people of colour', where 'nuclear boundaries are less significant in (raising children) than are extended family boundaries' (2003: 71).

What is at issue here is not so much that couples may differ on this matter, although of course they may. Rather, the issue may be that the practitioner will tend to bring forward the received assumptions of their professional ideology which, as has been argued, reflect 'Anglo' — that is, British and North American — traditions (Meemeduma, 1993; Dominelli, 2002; Allan, Pease & Briskman, 2003). Like the fish that cannot see the sea, practitioners can implicitly reproduce in their actions and attitudes the assumption that

“Both sets of respondents could be said to contest the assumption that each person is sovereign and rightfully self-determining.”

identity and personhood are bounded by the skin. A practitioner working from this implicit position will emphasise clients' personal choice, autonomy, entitlement and self determination even if these 'principles' are anomalous to the couple with whom one is working (Hodge, 2003).

The Question of Alignment

What often gives the practitioner the cue to think about, or focus on, matters to do with choice and individuality is that the practitioner will believe s/he has observed asymmetries in power and status as these relate to gender. The following section takes up this important matter as a priority that was not identified in the research, but which is informed by an engagement with the research material in a broader sense. That is, if one takes the research data and interrogates it for its usefulness to practitioners, a question is raised: how should the workers position themselves with respect to the presence of inequities as they relate to the linkages between gender and power? Even when asymmetries are framed as 'religious' or as 'cultural', however they are understood by one or both parties, how might practitioners be courteous and respectful yet also not transgress their own beliefs and morals?

Although there are tensions in all clinical work (Furlong & Lipp, 1996), whether described as counselling, casework, case management or therapy, the

question of alignment arises as distinctly problematic where the social position of women and men is anomalous and the rationale for this imbalance is religious. Clearly, this is an ethical and a technical matter and a question of both pragmatics and aesthetics. It is also a trigger for strong feelings: asymmetries in relationships that conjoin gender with power are often emotionally evocative, as they are interpersonally polarising (Hunter, 2001). We practitioners, like the involved intimate participants, often endow these asymmetries with a defining significance.

Assuming that the couple is heterosexual, it follows that the faith and culture, gender and sexual orientation of the professional sets up a particular configuration in relation to the couple. Without exhausting the many permutations, a key possibility is that an 'Anglo' practitioner can inadvertently be triggered into a process of 'other-ing' one or both of their couple clients (Dominelli, 2002). In this process, the practitioner loses empathy with, perhaps even dehumanises, one, or both, members of the asymmetric couple. The apparent beneficiary in the asymmetric relationship, usually the male, is experienced as 'wrong' or as 'backward' or as 'exploitative'. The less powerful partner is seen as 'a victim', as 'brainwashed', as 'needing consciousness raising'.

Subsequently (or concurrently) one partner, or both, may then 'other' the practitioner, who is seen as discourteous, disrespectful, as foreign and no longer engaging. Perhaps such dynamics are implicated in the high drop-out rate of people from diverse backgrounds in their contact with 'Anglo' services. One study suggested this drop-out rate was as high as 50%, as these one-visit shoppers did not return, and noted that their experience of this contact was that it was insensitive and inappropriate (Adams & Gilbert, 1998).

Clearly, presentations where major social norms have been breached, such as domestic violence, need to be categorically defined as unacceptable and prioritised as needing immediate attention. However, as one approaches those asymmetries that do not specifically breach major public norms, it is the practitioner's agenda, definitions, thresholds and sensibilities that are influential as much as what is being presented. The practitioner's values may take shape as: 'The traditional religions are all regressive', 'Women shouldn't have to put up with oppression' or 'My role is to give people choices'. Such positions reflect an emphasis on individualism and personal power which, as noted above, reflect the 'knowledge bias' of human service practices as the secular product of Western cultural traditions.

There are always dilemmas involved. In the case of a Christian woman and a Moslem man, even if their status is understood to be 'equal' in terms of education and social capital, their access to power and their relationship to stigma are factors that are so irreducible as to make it impossible for practitioners to position themselves surefootedly for both equity and for engagement. Variables to be considered include the creed, race, gender and status of the professional, the gestalt of which is so nuanced as to make it inappropriate to prejudge contingencies by taking up a set position as a matter of principle or set protocol. If we use the term 'culture' in its nonethnic sense, as the practitioner we are both 'hosts' and 'the other' in these crosscultural exchanges, so much so that unless we can see these meetings as potential rituals, as part of our life's journey, we will transgress or somehow trespass, however good our intentions may be.

As practitioners we are never neutral, and we do not wish to be, yet it is naive to believe that the simple declaration of one's position will be received as both courteous and engaging or that this will necessarily facilitate the desired outcome. We have to think through this complication: *sensitivity*, as Cox (1989) notes, is the fundamental attribute for understanding how to practise in diverse communities. We wish to be sensitive, to proceed with care, yet this is not to avoid that which is difficult to say: it is central that we do not avoid discussion of, and negotiation about, differences (Miller, Donner & Fraser; 2004).

What do we do as practitioners when one partner in a couple understands a problem — for example, difficulties with conception — as an expression of God's plan, as 'divine will' or 'the consequence of sin' while the other party thinks this is 'irrational and fatalistic'? Perhaps even more troubling, what if both parties see this difficulty as 'God's way' but *you* think this is irrational and fatalistic? In all practice situations, professionals have to determine the best way to position themselves with respect to the presenting problem, a matter which is frequently defined and constructed asymmetrically between the participants, including the professional (Furlong & Lipp, 1995). With respect to this task, practitioners should be aware that calls for respective religious 'authority figures' to adjudicate are likely to be inflammatory, as is the invoking, however inadvertent, of the experience of shame.

***Speaking Directly:
Should One Reframe 'Religious Differences'?***

A particular theme emerged which, over time, became a key focus in discussions as the two authors reflected

on, and exchanged views about, how best to bring the research data to the consulting room. Although it may sound strange, perhaps even contradictory, given the focus of the research was on religion, unlike Hodge (2004) we came to wonder: might it often be better if practitioners declined to focus on what seems like 'religious differences'? Might it, in fact, often be better to reframe out of differences that are embedded in stable, even rigid, oppositions based on religious doctrine, as we came to consider that ascriptions of conflict based on religious faithfulness tend to lead to processes that inflame rather than solve? Is it possible, indeed is it ethical, to cast the terms of the exchange into those that are more local, more fluid and less ossified than those that are inter-sectarian?

The research we have utilised in this paper suggested that tensions in relationships were often reported to involve perceived struggles about religion. As one Malaysian man stated: 'I rarely felt I was concerned about declaring my religion back home, nor did I know much about it. I am much more aware of it and defensive about it in Australia than I ever dreamt of'. The current research echoed what Speelman (as cited in Ata, 2003: 19) and other ethnologists have found: partners in mixed marriages feel a deep need to be heard, understood and respected by the person of another faith whom they love. Indeed, this seems important, yet one may ask: isn't this theme always important given each of us is, in terms of gender, background and so on, always 'from another planet' to one's partner?

Thus, the themes may well be the same in all marriages even when the 'obviously available terms' that carry the dialogue about difference are prefigured to be about religion. If they were not religious in configuration, they would default to the other 'usual suspects': gender, race, class, home-maker vs. breadwinner role, life cycle stage and so forth. Mindful of this pattern, practitioners may wish to consider reframing/redirecting controversy about perceived religious 'stuck points' into the more fluid notion of 'stages of the relationship', 'opportunities for growth' and so forth, that one would expect to consider if one was dealing with any difficult difference in 'ordinary' couples work.

In focusing on difference, is there a risk of inflaming tensions if that difference is (purportedly) religious? As we have seen in the communal violence that has occurred in places like India and Aceh, religious differences can be fanned into a raging fire. Yet, in many places and in many times, interreligious conflict has been absent or minimal. A brief, and

perhaps apocryphal, discussion of one of these latter examples from 1000 years ago may shine some light on why a policy of minimising the focus on religious difference may be preferred by some who are party to a mixed marriage.

Prior to the *Reconquista*, from around the 9th to the 12th century, the larger part of Spain — *Al Andulus* — was ruled by Moslem Arabs and Berbers. Prior to this period, the region and its rulers had been Christian, the descendants of the Visigoths. Thus, *Al Andulus* had a mixture of races and faiths which

... for the most part ... all managed to live side by side. Over the first three centuries of Islamic rule, many Christians converted to Islam and the cultures acquired characteristics in common, while still maintaining their distinct and separate identities. As in the Levant, where the Arab Christians became outwardly indistinguishable from the larger Moslem population, so too in *Al-Andulus* the superficial differences between the different groups diminished. Mozarabes (Arabized Christians) and Jews often adopted Arabic, while Berbers also abandoned their native dialects ... Yet the communities remained distinct: they preserved their customs and observed their own laws. This was the unique and paradoxical Spanish accommodation to which (the Spanish historian) Americo Castro gave the name *convivencia*, 'living together'.

Within what religious conditions did this *convivencia* stand? In part this occurred as

... under Islam the Christians and Jews were *dhimmi*s, the protected but subordinate minorities ... [so that] During those centuries [this] model for living together worked well, except for those who wished to accentuate religious differences (Wheatcroft, 2003: 72).

So, returning to the domain of practice, when should one focus on religion and religious difference and when is this focus likely to be polarising and destabilising? Once a debate is couched in religious terms, terms that invoke the absolute and the inviolate, it seems likely that a powerful and inflaming process is entrained, one that is actively constitutive in that it acts to 'accentuate(s) religious differences'.

As our concern with the inadvertent consequences of communicational directness deepened, the consideration of 'how direct to be about religious difference' expanded and became more concentrated, until it condensed into a matter that we thought might have a broader relevance to 'practice with diverse communities'. That is, an even more basic question than 'Should one focus on religious differences?' is 'Should one generally be direct?'. The

matter of communicational directness will be raised in deliberately general terms prior to outlining two final concerns that may also have a place in constructing practice with diverse groups, that is a re-considering of what is 'the professional-client relationship' and lastly, with a degree of irony intended, the question of 'Who is the odd one here?'

Extrapolations

Whether our work involves relating to individuals, couples, families or colleagues, it is a principle that we should be truthful. And it therefore follows that if we notice there is something important going on — especially if this 'something' is difficult to raise — this difficult-to-say matter should be said clearly. This would seem to be a guiding principle, mindful that one's role may vary enormously. For example, one's role may be understood in formally therapeutic terms, however variably these may be framed ('to work on your self-image/midlife issues', and so forth). At other times, we may find ourselves in roles that are framed in pragmatic, perhaps even in narrowly instrumental ways, in particular settings such as mental health ('You are to provide practical support, or time-limited case management').

Yet in all these roles there seems the same injunction: 'Don't collude', 'Break the silence', 'Speak the truth'. The naming of what is difficult to consider, and which may be hard to discuss, seems (at the very least) to be both the honest and the progressive option. Put personally, it seemed that becoming willing and able to 'Talk when the talking is tough' (Miller, Donner & Fraser, 2004) was a skill the practitioner author had committed himself to learning. It seemed that a rule of practice could be generally stated: *whatever might be behind the material that is initially presented* should be raised independent of whether you were asked to be direct or whether your role is explicitly therapeutic or not.

So, if one comes to think that sexual abuse may be, or may have been, a presence, one should bring a focus to this possibility; if feelings such as grief are undeclared but are subtly, or even palpably, present, the role of the practitioner is to (at least) put a name to them even if it is not necessarily appropriate to focus upon grief as a theme or to take as one's brief the 'working through' of this feeling. Similarly, if an issue of fairness is apparent to the practitioner, should not one at least make an observation to this effect, so one does not collude with this asymmetry, but acts so that the important-but-opaque is made visible? So, if there is a principle that 'It is better out than in', and I would argue that this is accepted as a principle by many practitioners, if one is

working with a person, or a couple, and a key aspect of the context is religious dissimilarity, doesn't it follow that this difference should taken up as a focus?

And this is where bringing together 'research' and 'practice' seemed like trying to round up cats; as discussed earlier, one of the research findings was that a significant number of respondents were not only surprised by the emphasis on religious difference, these people reported that they experienced this focus as distinctly unhelpful (Ata, 2003). As the Anglo-practitioner author put it: 'What! I don't get it. The research was explicitly about "religious difference", yet these folk don't want to get on with it, don't want to look at it directly'. A little later, and somewhat more reflectively, he said, 'Ummh, this might be — as the Narrative people used to say — a really newsworthy idea'. The idea that communicational directness is not necessarily the right option has (for some of us) the surprise and traction that provocative ideas prompt.

In reflecting upon the notion that it is not necessarily helpful to be direct, an uncertainty arises about the footprint we practitioners put on the ground of our practice. Here it may be possible to trace our reflection upon the mirror without this being narcissistic. Rather than assuming that it is a dogma to 'Tell it like it is', perhaps it is better to consider the injunction to be direct as a partial truth, one that can be rewritten as a question: 'Under what circumstances, and in what forms, is conversational directness the better path?'

Prior to taking up this idea further, it is important to pause and to ask: why might directness not be the way to go? Certain conceptual and technical reservations about directness can be quickly reprised. First, 'being direct' can be seen as an 'Anglo', 'male stream' cultural practice. Many cultures, perhaps all except that which we in the West call the 'first world', favour the courteous more than the direct. Particularly in initial encounters between strangers, the amount of 'face-work' to be processed (Goffman, 1969) requires that speed and haste be carefully distinguished. More traditional cultures, cultures that privilege honour and status (what we might term 'respect cultures') tend to be aversive to the experience of shame and to have exchanges proceed in steps that are circumscribed, perhaps even ritualised, to Western eyes.

Second, as is now well understood, it is an example of professional imperialism to take for granted that *my* opinion, *my* speculation or *my* construction is the *correct* form of understanding. We have learned from poststructural theorists (e.g. from a solutions and narrative perspective) that notions like 'denial', 'insight'

and ‘resistance’ are constructions by an observer, not objective features of the data/person being observed. No individual or group, however well credentialled, can reduce the many kinds of otherness we encounter into delineated universalised certainties. We are trained to know as practitioners that technically, if not morally, we seek to be courteous and affirming and to neither collude nor collide at least in the first (‘engagement’) phase of contact (Furlong, 2001).

Perhaps the practitioner-author is just a desperately slow learner; everybody knows — including him — that you have to build a relationship patiently prior to ‘doing’ the change-oriented work. Yet, on the other hand, we have to reserve the right to be able to ‘call it like it is’ however aware one is that there is no noncontingent position. Isn’t it always important to reserve the right to directly discuss abuse, suicide, grief, discrimination, power, mental illness — that is, *whatever might be behind the material that is initially presented?*

Was it the case that this apparent conundrum represented an opportunity to review what had been a taken-for-granted bias? A professional aspiration to employ directness may reflect personal interests; for example, the appeal of ‘healthy directness’, a quality that the practitioner had not always found in his Anglo-Irish middle-class habits? Such a value may also reflect a bias toward directness characteristic of pragmatic Western cultures and the customs of their professional spokespersons. If a concerted discussion of religious difference might be like putting out the fire with gasoline, it also follows that other difficult differences may also be in the same category?

Conclusion

Western customs around directness offer only a single instance of ‘our’ cultural anomalousness from a broader set of received practices we reproduce as if they are unproblematic. Another example is the preference most practitioners have for establishing ‘professional’ — rather than ‘friendly’ or ‘informal’ — relationships with their clients (Steiner & Bansil, 1989; Owusu-Bempah, 1999; Wali, 2001). Many people do not happily fall into line with this wish, especially those from that large set of groups who have been sensitised to the colonising practices of the dominant classes. Groups such as gays and indigenous people, people of diverse faiths and those who have been officially other-ed (Dominelli, 2001), do not tend to put their hand up to be adjusted, to undergo psychoeducation or to become the subjects of processes of normalisation. These people often feel uncomfortable with, and implicitly or directly contest,

the professional project and its distribution of roles and a priori configuration of relationships. This dissatisfaction is expressed in acts as emphatic as not returning after an initial session or two, a sequence that is not necessarily about motivation or neediness (Adams & Gilbert, 1998).

If we believe in partnerships, we need to be committed to changing our behaviours; that is, our received ways of thinking and doing, in order to be more engaging (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2002). A first step towards this aim is to identify specifically our cultural and professional customs. How do we do this? One way is to consider the ‘other’ as a mirror, as a sentient reflector of our professional and cultural presence. By seeking to clarify what kind of relationship the other seeks from me, I am clearer about what I am ‘programmed’ to prefer culturally and professionally. In naturalising the other’s preference for indirectness, I create a space for me to question, experiment and grow.

This stance rests on an existential premise, one that re-purposes our task from that of the expert technician to that of student, from the premise that I am ‘working on’ the other, to one that stipulates self-questioning and development. This re-purposing is at odds with the agency and the public’s expectations of professionals, and with the instrumental roles we sometimes have to undertake, and this contradiction requires careful attention. Nonetheless, if we can re-purpose our task in this way, we are offered a contrary and humanising dimension, an enlivening accent, into the business we undertake. Being alive to this level in our work means we can be ‘akin, not agin’ the other as our struggle and theirs — in carefully considered aspects — are assumed to be conjoint. We act as a host, a courteous and open-minded listener, and as a learner who can be assisted to know better, and to both grow into and to challenge, our own idiosyncrasies. Opposing all urgencies toward sameness, we can contribute to, and seek to live within, *la convivencia*.

A student put it this way: ‘What I think I bring to my work is ... the importance of hearing what is different about a person (rather than assuming the person is their category as a Catholic, a gay, and so forth). The question for me is not one of whether I can work with someone who is similar or who is different from me in sexuality, class, religion, gender, but can I hear what is different when all these attributes are the same?’ (McGill, 2004). And, we seek to bring our difference to our work as we do an appreciation of how ‘the other’ makes my own difference contingent and open to question.

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