

Living into Our Work

The Value of Uncomfortable Experiences in the Search for Professional Competency

Keynote address for the NZAC (Auckland) Mini-Conference, “Recent Research and Innovations in Practice”, 16 November 2007

Philip Culbertson

In his *Studies in Pessimism* (1851), the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote: “Every man takes the limits of his own field of vision for the limits of the world” (as cited in Drozdow-St. Christian, 2002, p. 13).

As counsellors and psychotherapists, we spend so much time in other people’s worlds. At the end of a long day in the counselling room, we are often tired, and need to reconnect with ourselves. How often have I said to myself, “I’ve spent seven hours today in everyone else’s worlds, and now I need to remember [or as Michael White (1997) says, ‘re-member’] my own.” And when we are exhausted, we run for comfort and security back to our own fields of vision, where we generally feel stable, and occasionally feel safe. There we can float, and pretend that the world is OK, and that no one is much different than we are.

When I came to St Johns Theological College in Auckland to be interviewed in mid-1992, the thing that immediately caught my attention was the diversity of the students in the classroom. At that time I was teaching at a university in the US where all the students were white and middle-class, and almost everyone who lived in that little Southern university town was also white and middle-class. Perhaps you can imagine my delight when I looked out at the audience attending my interview lecture, and saw Pākeha people of many different ages . . . and Māori, and Samoans, and Tongans, and Fijians, and Solomon Islanders, and Ni Vanuatu. At that moment I knew that if I were offered the job, I would take it, because I wanted to live and work in a world which was that diverse. I was only worried that I hadn’t stretched enough, or couldn’t stretch enough, to do that well.

That sort of cultural mix is the world we are all hurtling towards, here in Auckland. Demographic projections suggest that within another ten to twelve years those from Pākeha or European cultures will be in the minority in this city. But do our private practices reflect this diversity, or are we practising only within the comfortable limits of our own fields of vision?

I'm thinking about when I first started up my private practice in psychotherapy ten years ago, and for the first three years I only had male clients. At one point, I was seeing twelve male clients a week. I felt like I was being sent all the male clients that female counsellors didn't want to work with! At one point, my supervisor said, "Gosh, how do you tell them apart?" And that is the moment when I grasped that I could become a more effective therapist only by working with a much more diverse population. I don't understand how we move outside our own field of vision unless we find a way to actively engage diversity.

Some years ago, when I was living in the US, I was very impressed by a certain church policy. When people approached the officials in the Episcopal (Anglican) Diocese of Atlanta, Georgia, wanting to train for the ministry, they would be asked, "What is the situation in which you would find yourself most uncomfortable?" The friend who was telling me about this policy answered, "In a gay bar." So the diocesan officials assigned him to spend one night a week for six months in a gay bar, before they would consider further his application for ministry training. And as he told me later, that assignment changed his life.

How do we, as mental health professionals and as individual people, move outside our fields of vision, so that we stop assuming that the whole world is no larger than our own limited thoughts and experiences? We do it by adopting an attitude in which we are eager to learn about difference, to see what the world looks like to other people, and why they may or may not find their worlds to be as satisfying, or even more satisfying, than our own worlds of comfort, security, and familiarity.

As an aside, I'll mention the philosophy of Slavoj Žižek, one of the intellectual darlings of this decade. In his book *Looking Awary: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*, Žižek describes the way we perceive our own lives, and our societies and cultures, as like an audience watching a movie screen. We sit in front of our screens, and we go unconscious as we watch, lulled by the false security of the familiar. The purpose of the screen, or the familiar, if you will, is to cause us to forget the frightening chaos that lies behind the screen. If we were aware of that chaos behind the screen, we would go mad. And so we choose the familiar, the secure, the comfortable,

and within the limits of that field of vision we believe that everything is OK. And we believe that otherness is not frightening, and neither is nothingness.

To return to the stretching of our horizons, one of the most obvious ways in which we as professionals learn to be stretched is by reading. I'm curious, actually, about how much counsellors and psychotherapists in New Zealand read. I hope they read more than clergy in America do. In 2006, Jackson Carroll, one of the leading researchers on the habits and values of American clergy, published a book entitled *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations*. Among the findings reported (pp. 108–109) there was the rather startling statistic that the average American clergyperson, Caucasian or African-American, across all denominations, reads only four hours a week. They read almost exclusively in the areas of sermon preparation or ministry practice. Furthermore, Carroll surveyed the authors that these clergy were reading, and the top 40 authors named were all Caucasian males—not a female or non-White author among them.

I believe that as professionals we are obliged to read, often and widely, and across gender and culture. Martin Thornton, a British writer in the field of spiritual direction, made this statement in 1965 (p. 141):

One is suspicious of a doctor who has read no medical book for twenty years and knows nothing of modern drugs, and I suspect that intelligent modern Christians are getting suspicious of clergy who are ever engaged in something other than prayer, learning and such like professional occupations.... It is because a priest has time for prayer, for serious continuing education and frequent reading, and for reflection that his guidance of those in the world's hurly burly is likely to be worth having.

So if we too are going to be able to provide reflection and guidance in the midst of the world's hurly burly, surely we too must take seriously our continuing education and frequent reading.

But we learn, we know, in ways other than just the intellectual. In fact, to confine “knowing” to our brains is a very Euro-centric definition of knowledge acquisition, a kind of un-critical recapitulation of the Cartesian revolution: “I think, therefore I am”. In their influential book *Women's Ways of Knowing*, Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger and Jill Tarule (1997) describe a whole variety of ways of knowing that both compete with and complement the cognitive, “scientific” ways of knowing: received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, connected

knowing, as well as an awareness of the general relativity of all knowledge. In parallel to these “women’s ways”, Barnhardt and Kawagley (2005), in exploring indigenous ways of knowing, provide a great example of non-cognitive non-European ways of learning:

To bring significance to learning in indigenous settings, the explanations of natural phenomena are best understood by students if they are cast first in indigenous terms to which they can relate, and then explained in western terms. For example, when choosing an eddy along the river for placing a fishing net, it can be explained initially in the indigenous way of understanding, pointing out the currents, the movement of debris and sediment in the water, the likely path of the fish, the condition of the river bank, upstream conditions affecting water levels, the impact of passing boats, etc. Once the students understand the significance of the knowledge being presented, it can then be explained in western terms, such as flow, velocity, resistance, turbidity, sonar readings, tide tables, etc., to illustrate how the modern explanation adds to the traditional understanding (and vice versa). All learning can start with what the student and community already know and have experienced in everyday life. The indigenous student (as with most students) will then become more motivated to learn when the subject matter is based on something useful and suitable to the livelihood of the community and is presented in a way that reflects a familiar world view.

(Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005, pp. 3–4)

There are also the ways of knowing that the indigenous people of the Pacific carry. Some of these are spoken of in the new book that I have just co-edited with Margaret Agee and Cabrini Makasiale, called *Penina Uliuli: Contemporary Challenges in Mental Health for Pacific Peoples*. These ways of knowing include the profound femininity of the Pacific unconscious, the gift-exchange of love as a deep relationality, the importance of partnership and unusual forms of “we-ness”, what the spirit world wishes to teach us, the interface between our culture and our bodies, the communication of truth through metaphorical speaking rather than what we Europeans call plain speaking, why we are nothing if we are not connected to our ancestors, and so on.

If counselling and psychotherapy are about meaning-making, then shouldn’t we be highlighting these experiential and intuitive knowledges as much as we privilege the cognitive? Surely this is a pressing paradigm shift for us all, as Auckland moves increasingly toward being an ethnically and culturally diverse city, in which we aspire—I hope—to be the best-equipped mental health professionals we can be.

My three most recent research projects have been about intentionally taking myself outside my own comfort zone, or my own field of vision. Now I recognise how our field of vision changes naturally over the course of our lives. My social location at 63 is different in many ways from my social location at 17, for example. Parts of me, in myriad ways so predetermined by the location of privilege into which I was born, have at the same time become more conservative, and other parts of me more liberal. I need parts of me to rest securely in a settled sense of self, and yet I am very happy for other parts of me to wallow in ambiguity. But none of that gives me the right to rest on my laurels, to fall asleep, or to settle comfortably within any particular field of vision. Should I do that, I would be squandering one of the greatest quests of life: to figure out, somehow, how to engage otherness.

I'll give you a brief sketch of my three most recent research projects, and comment quickly on how they have stretched my field of vision:

The 'Afa'asi Project explored how identity is formed by people who carry more than one ethnic or cultural heritage. Participating in the project stretched me in three ways: (a) it raised difficult questions for me about how anyone's identity is formed, including my own; (b) it made me a lot more sensitive to the destructive impact of race politics, which is the dominant identity discourse in this country, at least as I perceive it; and (c) it created a whole new set of "sisters" for me, as I entered into deep collegial relationship with Pākeha, Samoan and Tongan women, many of whom I might not otherwise have come to know so well. I come from a family of sons only, so having sisters is a reparative experience.

A request from a European publication in theology, to write an article on whether and how God could be conceived of as a third-gender Pasifika person, or Samoan *fa'afafine*, stretched me to think again, as a theologian and counsellor, how easily we get imprisoned within familiar metaphors, to the exclusion of unfamiliar metaphors that might open up new spaces for surprising perceptions. It also gave me new insights into the social and cultural construction of gender and sexuality, including how un-creative the dominant Western discourses of gender and sexual identity can be. Imagine wrapping your head around this description of a Pasifika person who is born with a penis, but prefers a public gender identity which to us Westerners looks feminine: "The difficulty for *fa'afafine* or *fakaleiti* is that if they wish to have sexual encounters with men rather than with women this may be seen by others as having homosexual or same-sex relations, while they themselves may see sexual encounters with women as having same-sex or lesbian relations" (Farran, 2004, p. 137).

For an all-faculty research project on spirit possession in the School of Theology, my colleague Mary Caygill and I decided to do a limited qualitative research project on “the world of Pasifika spirits,” focusing in particular on the ways in which what are sometimes called “the invisibles” (Wood, 2006, p. 50) are conceptualised in Samoa and Tonga, and whether Western psychiatry has any clue how to deal with these presences. Of my three present research projects, this one has most stretched my own field of vision. During an interview in the home of a *fofō*, a traditional Samoan healer, I smelled and felt the presence of the *fofō*'s dead mother. I discovered that I had nowhere in my head or experience to put that event. Driving home from the interview, I was actually disoriented because I had been taken so far out of my own familiar. I think I had so entered the field of vision of that healer that I had temporarily lost touch with at least some of my own field of vision. When I got home, I had to do some careful work to re-ground myself in my own world, yet without losing touch with the other world that I had entered, and which has changed forever the way I understand the presence of Pasifika spirits.

I have shared these three examples to suggest that research can be uncomfortable, innovative, and transformative. Surely, research that is worth doing takes us to the margins of our field of vision, in spite of how difficult it is for us to know much of anything outside our own social location. I'll return to that point in a moment, as part of my closing.

But first, I want to point to six areas that I believe are crying out for more thinking amongst ourselves as mental health professionals, and that perhaps we have not spent enough time with, exactly because they threaten to take us too far outside own fields of vision.

How little we know about the construction of our own culture, and how little we know about how other cultures differ from our own. Of course, it is always easier to see another culture than it is to see our own, because the hegemonic nature of every culture retains its power by making it so difficult to analyse. But as Cabrini Makasiale will say in her presentation later this morning,¹ if you know only one culture, you probably know no culture.

How identity is constructed by anyone, but particularly by all those who are not middle- or upper-middle-class Europeans. This topic, too, is difficult to think about at all, because of the race politics in this country. In working with the 'Afakasi Project, Margaret and I have discovered that there is almost no published work in the fields of counselling and psychotherapy on Pasifika complex identity, and we have assumed that

this is because the topic is considered to be politically incorrect, or perhaps political suicide, by some very powerful groups in our society.

How genitals have nothing to do with gender or sexuality. I have already hinted at that when I discussed my project on *fa'afafine* theology. My ideas on this subject are deeply influenced by the work of Judith Butler (1999, 2004) but the more I work with her theories, the more I believe she is correct. Butler's work has allowed me to understand how any one of my clients can perform, within the same session, a variety of masculinities and femininities, and as well perform their desire through a variety of sexualities—no matter what particular set of genitals they have been born with.

How many people are in the counselling room, and how we know. Again, I have hinted at this earlier, in my brief comments on the world of Pasifika spirits. I have learned that it is not unusual for Māori or Pasifika clients to bring their dead into the counselling room. What I am still thinking about is whether those present-dead, or “the invisibles”, also become part of our client base, and if so, how we work with them.

The near-permanent emotional impact of school bullying. As I said earlier, I spent the first three years of my private practice working solely with males. Through them, I became aware of the long-term trauma sustained by some victims of school bullying. I believe we need much more research on this in New Zealand, because for now, the conversation around the “anti-smacking” legislation seems to have diverted our attention from the scourge of physical and electronic bullying that besets young men and women in this country.² And this point connects with my sixth area of concern.

Why the NZAC and the NZAP are not more politically active, more politically visible, when life itself is so political. Both our organisations started out with clear political agendas, to make New Zealand a safer and healthier place for people in live and grow up in. Somewhere, somehow, we have subsequently disappeared too frequently behind the closed doors of our counselling rooms. This society is hurting, as are our cultures, and our voices as mental health professionals are needed in the public arena, and in the media in particular. I believe that our public voices are part of the obligations of professional ethics, and so to fail to speak out is a form of moral failure. But how does the way we conceive of our professional responsibilities need to change to make that happen?

In conclusion, let me refresh our memories about the Schopenhauer quote with which I began: “Every man takes the limits of his own field of vision for the limits of the world.” And since this is a research conference, let me connect the quote to the specific subject of our research as professionals.

At a recent NZAC research conference in Hamilton, Bob Manthei made a presentation encouraging more research by us all.³ My keynote this morning is directed toward the same goal. Bob was an enthusiastic and humorous cheerleader for more research, and indeed, we desperately need more published, contextual research, so that we become less dependent on research from America and England. But perhaps my presentation today is a “But” to Bob’s “Yes”. I want our research to boldly go where no one has gone before, and we can’t do that by staying inside our present fields of vision.

Research isn’t just about knowing. If we are sensitive to the principles of linguistics, we realise that research is also about transforming. Language can be used to describe reality, or it can be used to construct reality. The Russian theorist Mikhail Mikhaelovitch Bakhtin (1981, p. 143) knew that, when he claimed that each of us is only the sum of everything that has ever been said to us in our lives by others. The language we use with others, and indeed, with ourselves, can either reinforce or reconstruct the limits of those fields of vision within which we live.

As an academic I am inundated with other people’s research. How often have I got to the end of a published piece of research and said to myself, “So? So?” Or maybe that’s “so-so”! I challenge you here to step outside your present field of vision and to create research that doesn’t just describe what you’ve thought or seen, but which transforms—transforms your research participants, transforms you, and above all transforms the readers of what you write. To paraphrase W. H. Auden, “you don’t read research; research reads you.” Let us, then, stretch ourselves outside the limits of our own individual fields of vision, and start producing research which reads, and transforms, our readers, and the world in which we live. Let us live into uncomfortable experiences in our search for professional competency.

Endnotes

1. Cabrini Makasiale’s case-study presentation was part of a mini-symposium, “Voicing the unspoken: Breaking through the barriers of mainstream institutionalised deafness to Pacific therapeutic practices”. It was based on her chapter in *Penina Uliuli: Contemporary Challenges in Mental Health for Pacific Peoples*, “The use of symbol and metaphor in Pasifika counselling”.
2. Mike Williams presented the paper “Using undercover teams to re-story bullying relationships” at both the NZAC Research Conference, Hamilton, October 12–13, 2007, and at the

NZAC (Auckland) Mini-Conference, “Recent Research and Innovations in Practice”, on November 16, 2007. A co-authored article with John Winslade has now been published: Williams, M., & Winslade, J. (2008). Using “Undercover teams” to re-story bullying relationships. *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, 27(1), 1–15.

3. Bob Manthei’s keynote address at the NZAC Research Conference 2007 was entitled “Research is formalised curiosity: It is poking and prying with a purpose. (Zara Neale Hurston)”.

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