

## Cross-cultural Space in Kiribati:

### *Outcomes and Reflections of Counsellor Training in Another Culture*

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#### **Abstract**

Counsellor training grew and changed during the latter half of the 20th century in New Zealand and in many other cultures. This article describes involvement by a Scots-New Zealander in counselling training in Kiribati, an island nation in the Pacific. The article describes the process of using a consultation model to audit and understand the training programme and the personal impact of doing such work in a culture very different from one's own.

#### **Introduction**

During the second half of the 20th century counselling training evolved in New Zealand from an internship and workshop model into educational programmes that are approved by the counselling profession. The providers of funding for the education and training of counsellors in the 21st century require some level of market research or needs analysis. This is also the case now in many other countries that are beginning this kind of education and training.

When I was invited to be involved in an embryo training programme for counsellors in the Pacific Island country of Kiribati, I used Egan's (1985) model of consultation as a framework to audit the programme. This article has two parts: the use of Egan's model and some personal reflection on the process. I have decided to use the first person for this work, in the style of some of the European qualitative research journals.

#### **Background**

For a number of years I have been involved as a volunteer in the selection process for Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA), a not-for-profit organisation that recruits New Zealand volunteers to work overseas. This connection, a previous degree and work experience in human geography, and a position as a trainer and lecturer in counselling at the then Central Institute of Technology (CIT) in Wellington, led a development

worker in Kiribati to approach me to audit a pilot training programme for counsellors in the Pacific Island state of Kiribati.

Kiribati is a small island nation on the equator made up of 33 low-lying atolls in an area of three million square miles of ocean. It is a developing country with few natural resources and it is registered as one of the five poorest developing countries in the world by the United Nations and the European Union.

Due to extremely difficult living conditions at subsistence level on the outer islands, most of the population of Kiribati has migrated to the capital, Tarawa, which now has 40,000 inhabitants living on narrow atolls joined together by causeways. The standard of living in Tarawa is seen by the local people to be better than that of the outlying atolls, since there is the chance of government or aid-related employment as well as education for the children. However, urbanisation of any kind brings changes, and I had been advised that related 20th and 21st century problems such as excessive alcohol consumption, AIDS, family violence, teenage suicide, population and related pollution problems were making an impact in Tarawa. The traditional extended family roles have changed. Many menfolk are employed by major companies on international shipping routes and are away from home for many months. Traditional small village life has gone. The influence of electricity, western videos and imported goods has meant change. Many of the traditional ways of dealing with interpersonal problems are now seen by the Kiribati and societies outside the country as being inhumane and inappropriate. Yet there is little in the way of social services or family support agencies to help people cope with this changing society.

At a national level, the democratic government of Kiribati has decided to avail itself of as much foreign aid as possible and there are some well-established United Nations, foreign government, non-government organisation (NGO) and church aid programmes in operation.

The Foundation of the People of the South Pacific (FSP) (Kiribati), a large NGO, has implemented major projects in Kiribati including revegetation, early childhood education and a large three-year project on reproductive health and family planning. In 2000 the country director of FSP was a New Zealander, while the rest of the staff were from Kiribati.

During implementation of the reproductive health/family planning programme, local FSP staff asked for help regarding ways to work with people around this sensitive area. FSP received some additional funding to send two staff overseas for a two-week training programme in "counselling". From her previous experience of such programmes the director did not believe this was the best use of the funds. She conducted a survey of the local social service agencies in Kiribati to gauge interest in a locally

provided course on counselling skills. She was impressed with the response and commitment of the agencies who were prepared to give staff time and funding to support such a course.

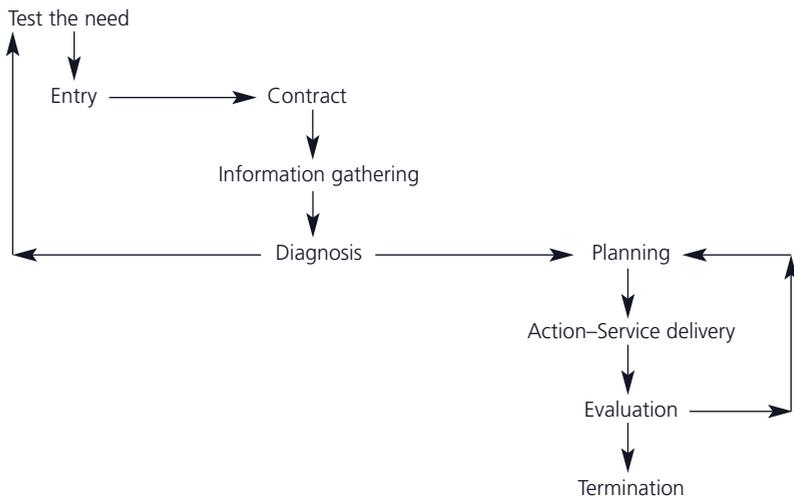
The director was herself a trained counsellor. She researched the local community and found two others who had had some training. One was an American trained in alcohol and drug counselling, the other a New Zealander (who also spoke fluent Kiribati) working in a church-related pastoral role. These three developed and wrote a course outline in consultation with the local FSP reproductive health staff and the course was advertised to the local helping agencies as a pilot programme.

The FSP director believed the course should be able to be a stepping stone to further overseas training, but from previous experience she believed that for this to be likely there needed to be some kind of external quality audit. At this point she approached me to act as an external auditor of the pilot counselling programme. My experience in designing counselling education and training programmes and of auditing led me to accept the task.

## Project process

The use of Egan's (1985) model of consultation (Diagram 1) was useful in providing a framework to follow through a respectful, ethical process.

**Diagram 1**



### **Testing the need**

The director of FSP had requested an audit of the programme and had provided a full explanatory letter giving the geographic, economic and social context for the request. From this point the correspondence was conducted by email, as the postal service was irregular and unreliable.

In reply to the director I advised of my skills and experience, and requested further information regarding the request. In particular I had some reservations regarding a New Zealander/European auditing a programme set up by New Zealanders and an American for Kiribati people. I voiced my concern to the director and was sent an email from the New Zealand tutor, who had solicited comments from the students which he reported in the email. The students did not see this as any form of colonisation or imposition of others' ideas. It was their choice to ask for information and training.

Most of the students had had tertiary education out of Kiribati, either in Fiji, New Zealand or Australia (through scholarship aid programmes). They saw this as an exciting new step where they could have some useful training in their own country. They wanted the training to be based on international, researched approaches and they wanted to be the deciders of what aspects of theory and practice would suit their cultural situation, rather than me being the decider. They also wanted to know if the level and content of learning would be of international equivalence. They knew about the New Zealand Association of Counsellors and its requirements for membership, and they also knew that some counselling standards were registered on the NZQA framework. They wished to know how their programme would compare with these.

It appeared that my qualifications and experience would fit the required request and as I have had considerable experience of travelling and living in tropical climates the physical challenge was well within my capability.

### **Entry phase**

The director of FSP had now suggested I work directly with the course tutor and I agreed to do this while sending a copy of all emails to the FSP director.

This stage of the project involved my being sent information about the counselling programme. The entry criteria, course information, sources of students and assessment were all details that helped confirm that the course was one I could confidently audit. I made suggestions as to the information I would require, the people I would like to interview and the time involved for auditing purposes.

The issue of cost was then discussed. There was little money. My accommodation and living expenses while in Kiribati would be paid for by FSP. The then Central Institute of Technology was willing for me to use my discretionary leave to visit

Kiribati for two weeks. I applied for, and was granted, funding from the Research and Scholarship Committee of the Central Institute of Technology, which paid most of my airfare.

### **Contract formulation**

The project goals of auditing the programme and producing a report with recommendations were formalised and my programme for the visit confirmed. The FSP specified details of the personnel and resources I would have access to. I had a clear contract for information required and limits of confidentiality of any information given to me by participants.

A procedure for auditing was also agreed, whereby all participants would complete a short questionnaire after I had visited. All contracted information with CIT, FSP and the staff involved was in writing.

### **Information gathering, diagnosis and action**

I had already received some information about the programme and had done some planning in conjunction with the contract phase. I also received and reviewed documentation and further information about the programme. This involved the recruitment, selection and assessment of students; the course material and methods of delivery, and moderation processes. I matched this against NZQA requirements for undergraduate certificate programmes (1995) and CIT audit requirements (1998). In such an audit there is also the requirement to interview stakeholders, so I also interviewed the tutors and students on the programme and people from the agencies that supported the students and saw their work. I used a semi-structured interview with questions relating to the issues that they saw which might require counselling skills, the type of training they were receiving, and its usefulness and effectiveness. I also asked questions about any further training requirements.

My contact involved interviewing:

- the training group, during one of their three-day workshops, in groups of three using the structured questions. I decided to work in groups as this took less of their training time and it also fitted well with agency backgrounds;
- the three tutors involved, together, using the same questionnaire;
- staff from five of the eight agencies that had supported staff attendance at the programme.

I kept notes as I worked and also journalled my own perceptions of the process.

### **Feedback and evaluation**

On the last day of my visit I had a meeting with the director of FSP and the other two tutors and gave a verbal report. I also left the evaluation questions to be completed. On my return to New Zealand I prepared a written report with some recommendations and sent it to the director of FSP within the agreed time frame.

The written report supported much of the programme and identified many aspects of similarity to programmes in New Zealand, such as:

- The integration of the processes of taught theory, supervised practice and personal reflection.
- A modular structure covering the topics of micro counselling skills, techniques of holistic assessment, referral, personal growth, ethics and supervision, and including client issues such as grief, depression, substance misuse and family violence.

The report also made some recommendations, which would help to make it a useful and relevant precursor to further training in the field. These involved:

- Further training, supervision and application for membership of NZAC for the tutors.
- Application for funding for visiting trainers and assessors.
- Support for the formation of an association of counsellors to facilitate a national code of ethics.

The project of auditing ended at this point.

### **Reflection**

The personal journal that I kept is in the style of reflexive action research (Lees, 2001). It was not used officially in my audit report but it allowed me to reflect on what I saw, heard and felt, as the impact on those senses was considerable. It further allowed me to expand my thinking into the context of the training programme that I was auditing and learning about, an area that is paid scant attention in many research or related activities (McLeod & Machin, 1998). It also prepared me for discussions about the project with colleagues and in supervision.

The islands and atolls I visited are in turn idyllic and polluted beyond imagination. A crimson sunset framed with palms and a gentle trade wind blowing are in stark contrast to the water supply, which is unsafe, the polluted lagoon, the little soil in which to grow food, and the fact that most foods are imported. This is a country dependent on aid to survive. The sea level may well rise over the whole country if global warming continues at its present rate. I write about my feelings of hopelessness in my journal. I write about how seemingly small my contribution is and its potential effectiveness. Then I meet the trainees. They are excited about their training. They tell

me they are making many personal changes that are affecting their lives for the better. I discover that they are not in despair about their islands. They describe how the training they are having is affecting their work in hospitals, the prison, schools, women's centres and the reproductive health programme. I visit the people from the agencies and they talk of difference. They tell me that they have problems to deal with which are problems of the modern world. They use some of their own ways to deal with them but they are not enough and they have been using and adapting the learning being shared and demonstrated by the trainees. They say that learning about options and choices has been very powerful even in everyday life. They begin to inspire me. I have more hope. I seem to have come through some threshold.

I have considered this phenomenon of "cultural shock" in the context of other studies related to people who choose to work in different countries (Hudson, 2000, 2002) and it is also the subject of my doctoral research. A useful metaphor to understand such an experience is the hero's journey (Campbell, 1968, 1988; Osland, 1995) or the heroine's journey (Noble, 1994). The narrative of personal change described by such "sojourners" is about confrontation with one's inner self and values.

Travelling from one's familiar culture into a different culture challenges many of the coping mechanisms of what Rank (1959) calls our "cultural illusion", and allows what existential philosophers such as Kierkegaard described as "cultural normality" to be shed or at the very least examined. In Kiribati I seemed to make my "personal peace with reality" (Osland, 1995) and stripped of my own cultural illusions I was better able to "meet" the people involved in the training programme. The participants engaged with me willingly and enthusiastically; the cross-cultural space was comfortable.

Having Egan's model was useful and I believe an important part of the auditing process. Allowing personal reflection to permeate the process contributed to a fuller understanding of the context. When the role of the researcher, in this case auditor, is acknowledged, examined and processed in a reflective way then qualitative research can provide increased rigour by enabling access to tacit knowledge that would otherwise be lost or unavailable (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

## **Postscript**

My relationship with Kiribati and the training programme has moved on. In 2001, the newly formed Kiribati Counselling Association invited me to be a visiting trainer for both the former trainees of 2000 and those of 2001. This was a new role and I enjoyed noting the progress of the programme.

The involvement of the original tutors is now less. Some of the original students are involved in training, and they are seeking funding themselves for further training.

Some of the students have gone on to study in Fiji, having been able to use their counselling training as a useful foundation for further training in psychology, management and advocacy.

During this second visit I taught collaboratively with local people about ways of counselling couples. I also taught models of supervision. This time I was less challenged by the environment and quickly slipped into the cultural space of my previous visit. There was familiarity and more learning about how best my experience and knowledge could be useful to the trainees. I gave of it willingly and again in return I was inspired by their determination and thirst for learning.

I returned in 2002 as a visiting trainer and it was a pleasure to teach workshops for both current students and former students who are now involved in training.

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