

## **Counselling for Sexual Abuse: a therapist's guide to working with adults, families and children**

By Kathy MacDonald, Ian Lambie and Les Simmonds.  
Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1995, 315pp, NZ \$44.95.

This book, written by counsellors for counsellors, is based on the authors' practice experience, and their knowledge, from running workshops, of what other counsellors want to know about sexual abuse counselling. A highly readable and balanced account, it is soundly based on academic sources and is invaluable both for concentrated study and as a quick reference.

The focus on counselling itself admirably fills an existing gap, since detailed accounts of how therapists facilitate change are largely missing. Books on sexual abuse recovery to date have focussed either on the rich narratives of survivors, for example Turner (1989) or Wood and Hatton (1988); or more academic considerations that detail the incidence, nature and effects of abuse, for example Jehu, Gazan and Klassen (1988) or Haugaard and Reppucci (1988). Discussion of treatment tends to consider what the client will need to do, rather than the counsellor, and even Hall and Lloyd's clear and practical book (1993) only devotes one chapter of 13 to therapeutic techniques. While historically there may have been a need to discuss abuse in detail in order to address professional ignorance, there is now a danger that a continuing major focus on the client and neglect of the therapeutic relationship, or the activities of the counsellor, may overly problematize client experiences and neglect the joint journey which counsellor and client embark on.

Written with an overseas market in mind as

well as New Zealand, the book treats only generally the effects of the supra-system on the counselling relationship, such as the legal, welfare, cultural and societal elements that impact on counsellors' work. The book distinguishes between the theoretical base to the authors' work and the eclectic approach to the techniques they use. Theory is primarily founded on family therapy with an emphasis on narrative. While feminist therapy is also named as a guiding force, its impact on therapy practice is less obvious. Cultural issues are dealt with rather superficially; the authors state that matching the client's cultural background with that of the counsellor will assist understanding, but fail to note that this should also reduce the risk that counselling become part of a societal abuse of the client.

It is taken for granted that going back over the abuse experience will be important, although some would argue that this is not always required. The writers also assume that the abuse brought to counselling will be largely remembered, and do not deal with the processes of memory recovery when abuse has been forgotten or denied.

Introductory chapters on the nature of abuse, the theoretical stance and a separation of healing from therapy are followed by some generally relevant therapeutic tools. The book then moves into considering specific therapy contexts, providing detailed examples of the authors' work. They indicate that they usually begin with the family and a chapter is provided on this with a strong focus on families where children have been abused. Family, or more properly couples, work with adult abuse survivors is less evident. There are however good examples of the value of teamwork in sexual abuse counselling with family members.

The great strength of this book lies in its contribution to work with children. The large range of activities suggested can only enhance therapist options. Catharsis is carefully situated as presenting the opportunity to develop new roles, not as an end in itself, and attention is also given to safety education. There are useful guidelines for helping parents and children to understand the difference between the expression

of feeling allowed in therapy and appropriate behavioural limits at home. There is little comment however on the additional difficulties children removed from home may experience, which can interfere with recovery from abuse. The chapter detailing the use of puppets with a ten year old boy provides a vivid account of practice, although the counsellor's style is a little too directive at times.

Work with adolescents is dealt with more generally, in contrast to the very concrete coverage of children. While the chapter is good theoretically, it lacks the detailed attention to therapeutic tools evident in other sections. Obviously many techniques discussed elsewhere will be relevant to adolescents too, but this age group can be especially difficult, as is recognized in this chapter, and deserved therefore the same attention to practice. The chapter on adults again provides tools, including techniques from NLP, Gestalt, Action Methods, Narrative and Ericksonian approaches. It is interesting, given the greater number of females seeking help with abuse recovery, that both the adult and child detailed examples of casework involve male clients. The section on counselling offenders is brief and sits somewhat uncomfortably in the context of the book overall and its stated underpinnings in family and feminist theory. As the authors indicate, a different type of therapy is often required, since clients may be reluctant or unready, and the main approaches suggested here seem more cognitive and behavioural.

The book finishes with a section on counsellors and counselling and considers issues for individuals, teams and agencies. Supervision is strongly recommended but the model of supervision assumed casts the supervisor as expert adviser. The discussion of power relations in teams is a good beginning, but gender issues and gender accountability are neglected. Finally the authors identify the importance of providing more male therapists and developing culturally appropriate counselling for all groups.

This book's great strength is its value in increasing therapist power, creativity, flexibility and resourcefulness; working with abused clients who are struggling with feelings of disempowerment themselves can lead

counsellors to become either overly directive or equally disempowered. While the breadth of material covered at times means that complex issues are rather superficially presented, the book's overall optimism, balance and good sense are admirable. Everyone working in this field should have a copy on their shelves.

## References

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## Re-Authoring Lives: Interviews & Essays Michael White (Dulwich Centre Publications, 1995)

On reviewing this book, I am conscious of the importance of words and the sensitivity of language. My thoughts have been on the need to choose my words carefully, else I run the risk of "imposing" my thoughts as reviewer on to the reader, the role of reviewer somehow lending weight to the notion of critical reviewer-ship.

Hence the many aborted attempts to get it right and to do justice to what this book is about, in keeping with the intention in which it was written.

It feels a daunting task, so in the end I decided to highlight a few personal responses I had from reading the 6 interviews and 3 essays that make up the book. It will not be the whole picture, or the complete story, but other readers, in the spirit

of co-reviewship, can add their own.

It is always fascinating to get a chance to look behind the mirror, as Alice discovered, and see how things work, a glimpse to what lies beyond the practice. Only, in this case, unlike Alice, a chance to share the thinking behind the therapy, catapults the reader forwards to new thinking and ideas rather than backwards into old stuck systems and patterns going around in circles.

The book's format of interviewing allows questions to be asked that open up space between the practice and the thinking that fills necessary gaps for practitioners in narrative models. The interviewers know what it is they want to know. The questions are clear, provoking and elucidating. The people are a mix of long-time colleagues and more recent voyagers and represent a curious position rather than a critical one

The first interview gives an historical account of how Michael White developed his ideas over time and is a good place to start. It shows how developments in cybernetics and patterning, influenced by the work of Bateson, moved through time to the use, among others, of metaphor and storying, influenced by Foucault, Geertz and Bruner. The themes of personal agency and resistance to subjugation remain clearly consistent throughout this time.

In the interview *Politics of therapy*, Michael readily acknowledges the influence of women's culture and stories, on his work, describing himself as "pro-feminist action" in wanting to redress injustice and abuses suffered by people in their lives.

Throughout the book there is a strong preference for working from the narrative of experience position, as distinct from the therapist as "knowing expert": the choice of the imposed objective reality of the dominant story or the personal reality of the lived experience.

The political ramifications of such a position are enormous and threatening to the status quo, which is why there is not a whole-hearted embracing of narrative models across the mental health field.

I believe the work this book represents is not just a reflection of post-modern thinking, of raising subjective knowledges to a position of

importance. The challenge or cutting edge that excites me is the opposition this work takes to the "postures of spectatorship" and rule-governed functionalism. The last essay in the book draws on ideas of Geertz, who is quoted extensively - "connecting action to its sense .... rather than behaviour to its determinants". It seems to me that it is in this "connection" that the emphasis of the work can be made. Moving away from the notion of the "ideal language", the "empirical" truths, the objective referencing of our experience, can be intoxicatingly freeing for us as therapists and for our clients.

This, to me is the radical political edge that the book takes us to. The politics of relationship are exposed in the difference between objective system and pattern approaches, and subjective worlds of experience. What conversation we engage in, what meaning we place on that conversation, who decides what is talked about, how it is interpreted and made sense of, to whom does the conversation belong?

This book proposes that the world of interpretation and storying is not only the domain of the therapist, but is owned by our clients. The act of meaning-making and storying, re-storying and performing, is the therapeutic acts which frees people from the oppression of the dominant stories.

This is a thought-provoking and transparent book. It makes the thinking behind the practice and the therapist explicit, and in doing so reveals the strengths and vulnerabilities of that process.

Persevere if the language is new to you, don't dismiss it as jargon. The ideas and stories contained in this book are like specks of gold glinting among the stones, waiting to be discovered and add richness to our practice.

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