

# Letters to the Editor

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*Written on receiving and reading New Zealand Journal of Counselling, Vol. XIII, No. 1 and NZAC Newsletter 22.4.92.*

Dear Margaret and Hans,

"People respond to people who respond," suggests Ashleigh Brilliant; and Ruth Anderson has written about counsellor accountability and differences between practitioners and researchers; and Bob Manthei has tracked the development of the Journal over fifteen years and fourteen issues.

I have so many responses, intellectual and emotional, to what I've read in the Newsletter and Journal today. Trouble is, I'm a practitioner, and the challenge for me is to find the time and resources for the researching and referencing that could support (or otherwise) what I have to say. So, rather than not responding, I'm writing my response as a letter, acknowledging that in the context of the Journal, it may seem like a speech without the embellishment of a waiata.

"I'm just a worker here: a good worker," was my refrain of 1991, as I worked at clarifying roles and boundary issues I was facing in my work. Well, editors and readers, I'm just a worker here, too, a practitioner valuing the theory and research offered by the Journal and wanting to claim airtime/journalspace for practitioner experiences, observations and responses.

Anderson writes of "our inability, and at times perhaps, our reluctance, to define and describe what we do" (p.4), and also suggests, "True public accountability however, demands that counsellors make every effort to define and describe what it is they do." (p.10). Guilty, I confess. I do find it difficult to define what I

do, but listen in on any case discussion at supervision and you'll hear clear description.

Anderson's concern is about the dichotomy that has existed between researcher and practitioner, and I wonder to what extent it's the rigour demanded by definition that has created that dichotomy, and maybe also explains the "lack of publishable material" (for the Journal), mentioned by Manthei (p.12).

Whose language is it that provides definitions, and who provides the terms by which we are accountable - and what do the processes we attend to in counselling tell us about all this?

It's my experience that many of the people who come to me as clients, come because they haven't been heard, because their experiences haven't been validated, because they have been required to talk someone else's language, because they're struggling to make sense of their experience of the world. For some, the separation between the outer world and their inner reality has become untenable.

I'm reminded here of a masters student, a woman with a brilliant intellectual and sophisticated political understanding of patriarchy and male power, who told me of the emptiness of that understanding and her desire to shout at the professor, "Can't you see I've been sexually abuse!" Over some months, by valuing and listening to the knowing of her inner world, where self understanding lay beneath the pain and horror of abuse, we worked together in counselling to bring together those separately experienced worlds.

And so I begin to see why, as a practitioner, at times I've felt distant from, unsupported by, or even harangued by, what I've read in NZAC/NZCGA Journals. The danger is, I think, that writers of theory can do practitioners a disservice when they

communicate only in the language of the outer world, where "define and describe" are words used consistently in tandem. While I agree with Anderson's concluding sentence about the value of the collaborative tasks on which counsellors and researchers can embark, and am interested in her references, I am still left asking, "What does it all mean? What does it mean for me as a counsellor, for the work I do with the people who come for counselling?" Like the student who wrote brilliant essays about the patriarchy, I find intellectual meaning in what I read, but I struggle to find connections with the reality of what goes on between clients and me in the work we do together. It seems to me that in seeking to answer questions of accountability, or to undertake research in a fashion that addresses only intellectual meaning, I would be in danger of abandoning myself as a counsellor in the same way as some of those who come to us as clients have had to abandon themselves for survival in a world that refuses to acknowledge their experiences.

I agree that it's important that as counsellors we communicate, in language of mutual understanding, the reality of our work, to clients, to our employers, to each other, and to "the public". In doing so, however, I will not give away my own frames of reference in order to speak only in the language of accountability and transparency demanded by management systems that are incongruent with my counselling values and ethics. Do you remember Ida Gaskin's address to the NZCGA Conference at New Plymouth in 1988, where she warned us of the meaninglessness of the new jargon, and of the sort of society created when meaning is bestowed upon words like "accountability" and "transparency"? How much counsellor reality must we abandon to survive in systems where the ethos is different from our own? Do we join the accountability scramble on its own terms and do we require this of each other? Or do we retain our counsellor optimism and find other ways of communicating?

Anderson suggests that "we must be open and honest about what we do and how we do it". Yes, let's do that, and let's be as creative and innovative about that process in writing in this Journal as we are in our counselling rooms. My purpose in writing is to encourage myself, and other practitioners, to value and write about our "practice wisdom" (and to do so, where necessary, in language that has particular meaning for us). As our Association moves through this period of rapid growth and change, mirrored in developments in the Journal too, my need and hope is that our Journal will be a journal of counselling, theory and practice.

My request to you as editors is that, through editorial policy and invitation, you encourage the publication of lively, practice-based material. My request to my counsellor colleagues is that we submit material for publication that reflects the strength and vitality and integrity of our practice as counsellors.

Kathie Crocket.