



Scotland (1992)

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Introduction

In 1991 I moved from the Netherlands to Edinburgh, Scotland. When I was originally asked to teach Fundamentals in Scotland, I said 'No!' because I saw that there was a very high drop out rate and no real follow-up support to keep new Co-Counsellors in Co-Counselling.

Q1. What was your vision when you first set up your Co-Counselling project in Scotland?

My main aim was to make Co-Counselling available to as many people as possible: I was thinking of thousands of Co-Counsellors in a region like Edinburgh instead of the tens that seemed usually to be the case. Because attaining this was too big a job for one person, my next and related aim was to create a big pool of really committed volunteer helpers. This was important as the community was quite depleted at the time and I didn't want to keep doing most of the work.

1. A network carrying several communities

Many years of experience have led me to the conclusion that communities have a filtering effect. People who share beliefs, lifestyles, values etc. tend to join in, while people with different backgrounds tend to stay out or leave.

A separate observation is that Co-Counselling communities, tend to have short life cycles. This seems especially so for very informal communities such as those in Glasgow, Birmingham, Den Haag, Hamburg, which died after some years of blossoming.

So in order to envisage 1000 Co-Counsellors in a region I had to come up with a better idea than that of a 'Co-Counselling community' with 1000 members, while not wanting to abandon the usefulness of the "community" concept.

My vision was of a Scottish Co-Counselling Network, big enough to carry several Co-Counselling communities and also those individuals who would not feel at home with any of the available communities.

A network provides a greater variety.

I see a Co-Counselling network as carrying a huge variety of beliefs and lifestyles, e.g. Marxism, Buddhism, Christianity, Socialism, new age spirituality, travellers, professionals etc. A Co-

Counselling network therefore can give space equally to Co-Counsellors who think that 'spirituality' is the new paradigm of Co-Counselling, and to others who think that this is nonsense. A single community, however, is likely to reflect only one set of shared beliefs. The variety provided by an extensive network is attractive and provides Co-Counsellors with different ways of using Co-Counselling.

A big network supports small, local communities that otherwise have a smaller chance of survival.

When small communities are embedded in a bigger network, their members are more likely to attend Co-Counselling events elsewhere in the network, weaving their connections with other Co-Counsellors and finding some additional Co-Counselling inspiration. This tends to strengthen the Co-Counselling within the small community. In times of crises the small community is more likely to ask for and to get support. And that could help them to stay alive.

2. A motivated bunch of volunteers supporting the network

Keeping the network running, I was sure, would involve a combination of tasks such as running a variety of workshops, supporting new Co-Counsellors, and administrative jobs. These latter would include producing an attractive newsletter and keeping the membership and financial administration up to date. I dreamt of a bunch of motivated volunteers who would carry out these jobs and look after the network.

However, people do not start Co-Counselling to do voluntary jobs of this sort: they want it for sessions, access to workshops and mutual support. Despite this, quite a lot of Co-Counsellors are prepared to take on small, short term jobs that have a clear beginning and an end. But only a few are willing and able to offer a long term commitment that involves a lot of effort and persistence when things become difficult. In my experience only 5-10% of the Co-Counsellors will be prepared to make such a longer-term commitment to Co-Counselling. Out of 1000 Co-Counsellors there will be 50 to 100 committed volunteers, which seems a good number to me. And here a big network of at least 1000 Co-Counsellors comes in handy.

But the challenge remains: how to 'breed' enough committed volunteers within a small community?

Q2. What factors did you consider to be important in turning your vision into reality?

It is easier to lose a freshly trained Co-Counsellor than to find a new person who wants to explore Co-Counselling. Therefore I spent quite a lot of time thinking about which factors contribute to an unnecessary loss of newly trained Co-Counsellors and what could be done about that.

1. Co-Counsellors vote with their feet

Co-Counsellors tend to leave Co-Counselling if they don't easily find what they want or need. Most Co-Counsellors are happy to attend workshops and enjoy the support on offer, but generally are

not prepared to get involved in organising. It is very rare for anyone to get involved in organising the workshop they need, or even in taking part in discussions about what sort of workshops they would like.

Closely related to this is another phenomenon: **Co-Counselling lacks a good feedback culture.**

If there is something that Co-Counsellors don't like, they process that in sessions (or not) and very often they don't feed this back to teachers or workshop organisers. The 'Positivity' culture itself inhibits feedback: Co-Counsellors are encouraged to express the 'good and news' of a Co-Counselling event, but NOT what they have found lacking.

Based on these factors, my best guess about why new Co-Counsellors leave is that Co-Counselling does not meet their needs. The challenge is to try and figure out what these needs are, and to try and meet them.

2. Co-Counsellors do socialise!

Healthy socialising is important to Co-Counselling for two reasons.

Firstly, many people come to Co-Counselling with a lot of distress around past socialising, parents, siblings, peers, teachers etc. Many problems Co-Counsellors have stem from earlier socialisation problems. Sessions may help to overcome past distress around socialising but they do not necessarily lead to more functional socialising skills.

Almost 90% of CCI Co-Counselling manuals is about sessions or session related material. Co-Counsellors, however, spend a lot of time with each other outside sessions and they seem to like it. Co-Counselling workshops are often used to try out new socialising behaviours. Yet in the CCI Co-Counselling literature peer socialising issues such as (sexual) attractions, conflicts, assertive behaviour, let alone communication skills, relationships or group dynamics seem to be an afterthought.

Secondly, a good socialisation culture that supports healthy connections between people forms a useful breeding ground for committed future volunteers. About this, more later.

Healthy socialising is threatened by some factors

The lack of socialising skills can lead to disturbing difficulties: breach of safety, control and manipulation or power abuse, distressed sexual attractions and split up of relationships, gossip, to name but a few. In this context it is wonderful that so many Co-Counsellors with difficult relationships in their background seem to be able to relate to each other so well. However, having been a Trust Person and having listened to many safety issues at the 'Conflict & Safety in the Network' workshop, I think that many of the more difficult issues remain hidden under the rule of 'Confidentiality' and the shame people sometimes feel about having experienced such difficulties.

The "Celebrate the person, interrupt the Pattern" theory

One of the biggest threats to a healthy socialising culture is the "Celebrate the person, interrupt the

Pattern" philosophy, rife in some parts of CCI Co-Counselling. However nice this theory may look like at face value, in practice it works differently. If you choose to do so, it is easy to label other people's behaviour and thinking as patterns. Basically this labelling is totally arbitrary and subjective, depending on the eye of the beholder. Being able to label another person's behaviour or thinking as being patterned provides the justification that you have it right and the other person wrong. From here this theory allows one Co-Counsellor arbitrarily to dismiss the other person's belief system or behaviour, or push through his or her boundaries.

Co-Counsellors who are in need of feeling right are provided by the "Celebrate the person, interrupt the pattern" philosophy with the tools and justification ('patterns are wrong') to get that feeling, by looking for and spotting patterns in other people. A further problem is that some pattern-spotters seem to need an audience. They prefer to talk to other people about how patterned they consider their target person to be and sometimes even publish their views, if a Co-Counselling newsletter allows them to do so.

Once this is happening in a Co-Counselling network, the effects on the settling in of new Co-Counsellors are disastrous. Many of them don't like what is happening and will leave Co-Counselling before having really explored what Co-Counselling has on offer. This has happened in Scotland where two years of my Fundamentals people have almost totally disappeared and the network membership has halved.

Challenges to healthy socialising in Co-Counselling

If we don't want to forbid socialising among Co-Counsellors like in Re-evaluation Co-Counselling or to lose Co-Counsellors because of socialising difficulties in Co-Counselling, then we have some challenges at hand.

1. How can the development of healthy socialisation skills and an awareness of its pitfalls be promoted?
2. How can we develop a Co-Counselling theory of socialisation that is based on the concept of 'empowerment' instead of that of 'spotting and interrupt patterns' or 'oppression'. E.g. how can a Co-Counsellor learn to deal with difficult behaviour by other people without needing to label them or their behaviour as being 'wrong', oppressive or patterned, just disagreeing or disliking. This then can be a base for providing (new) Co-Counsellors with empowering support to deal themselves positively with safety, conflicts & complaints issues.

3. Supporting Co-Counsellors to learn to facilitate

Learning to facilitate workshops allows Co-Counsellors to meet their own needs and those of other Co-Counsellors. Once facilitation skills have been learned, a Co-Counsellor can set up his or her own themed workshop, which contributes to the variety of such workshops available in the network, which in turn provides more opportunities for new Co-Counsellors to settle in to Co-Counselling. The variety of workshops offered is one reason for the success of the International CCI meetings.

The challenge is how can Co-Counsellors be encouraged to develop the skills, the confidence and motivation to organise and facilitate workshops themselves?

4. 'Breeding' committed volunteers

As I said before, I was dreaming of a bunch of committed volunteers, enthusiastically running workshops as well as doing jobs essential for keeping the network going and growing.

Roughly speaking there are two kinds of Co-Counselling volunteers. The majority of them are prepared to take on small, short term jobs that have a clear beginning and a clear end. Only a few, however, are willing and able to offer long term commitment that might require unexpected effort and persistence when things become difficult. It is this kind of volunteer we need most, as they often provide the conditions that enable others to take up their small jobs.

Therefore the challenge is: How can we 'breed' these long term committed volunteers? How do we need to look after the Co-Counselling garden so that there will eventually be a blossoming of committed volunteers? I have discovered three necessary 'fertilisers' so far.

1. A really good experience with Co-Counselling

Only if people have the experience that Co-Counselling has made and is still making a real difference in their lives, they might take up commitments to volunteer. Supporting Co-Counselling comes then from within.

2. 'almost 'family' like connections with other Co-Counsellors

It was in my chats with American and London Co-Counsellors in the eighties that those people who were committed to Co-Counselling and carrying the work were people who were connected to each other in 'family' like bonds. And generally they developed these bonds in long term support groups. The same I observed here in Scotland. When the conflict in the Scottish network came to its climax, it was the members of the long term support groups who took up the commitment to continue the network. Without them it would have certainly collapsed.

3. 3. Healthy and functional relating patterns

In the same way that real life families vary in functional and dysfunctional behaviours, Co-Counsellors and support groups vary in their social and functional skills. People would not come into Co-Counselling if their relating to themselves and others were effective in the first place. I have come to the conclusion that many long term support groups provide their

members with the opportunity to experiment with their social skills and by doing so to develop more functional relating skills.

However, Co-Counselling support groups usually seem to have short life spans and to create disappointment in their demise. Therefore my challenge was to explore ways in which I could advise new support groups to get the best possible start for a long and healthy life. If I could find this out, I would discover how a breeding ground can be provided for committed volunteers, so needed for the blossoming of Co-Counselling.

Q3. Which aspects of your Fundamentals course support new Co-Counsellors to settle in to Co-Counselling?

1. Integration of Co-Counselling with daily life

The more clearly Co-Counsellors see how Co-Counselling can be integrated in daily life, the more likely they are to use it for their daily emotional needs.

Telephone Co-Counselling brings sessions in almost immediate reach when needed, especially when there is a list published of Co-Counsellors generally available for telephone Co-Counselling. However, it is not everybody's natural inkling to reach for the phone. Therefore people need to acquire telephone Co-Counselling experience during the Fundamentals before they are likely to use telephone Co-Counselling.

Encouragement to create a mental and physical space at home for sessions

If people are at ease with having sessions at their homes, arranging a session loses the complication of finding a venue for that session. Students are requested to have several sessions in each other homes between the Fundamentals weekends anyway, but during the course we review in the group how it is to have sessions at home. This provides the opportunity to exchange tips and suggestions for people who find it difficult to have their sessions at home. Obviously the three weekend format provides more opportunities for reviewing than the two weekend format.

Hand-outs and free manual

There are Co-Counsellors who read books and use them to find guidance. Therefore the supply of a free manual and course handouts, give them the chance to read them, when they need them.

2. Supporting transition into the network

Experienced Co-Counsellors coming in at the end of the Fundamentals.

During the Fundamentals the students often build up a great familiarity with each other. This regularly seems to form a barrier against having sessions with people they don't know: "I can't have a session with somebody I don't know". Quite often there is also the belief that they as freshers are not good enough to be a counsellor to experienced Co-Counsellors. These beliefs can only be challenged by reality. Therefore I ask experienced Co-Counsellors to come into the

Fundamentals on the last day, and to have three sessions in a row with the new people. In this way the freshers get the experience of having sessions with unknown, experienced Co-Counsellors and of having three sessions in a row. It is nice to see time and time again how positively confronting this experience is to their previous beliefs.

Encouragement to attend the next Community day.

The monthly open Co-Counselling day provides freshers with the opportunity to meet new Co-Counsellors and to have sessions. I noticed that if the host of the next Community day is among the experienced Co-Counsellors coming in on the last day, more freshers are tempted to attend that Community day.

'Do not socialise until...' advice

I recommend my students not to socialise until they feel confident as client and as counsellor. If they start socialising then, they have at least the Co-Counselling tools and partners available to work on the restimulations and disappointments socialising may bring. If they start socialising too early, they are at risk of losing Co-Counselling as well. I explain also the potential pitfalls of (early) socialising.

3. Teaching the Rescue Triangle

The Rescue Triangle describes common patterns that people may have learned that control other people's behaviour. The Rescue Triangle describes those patterns and how they inter-relate with each other. Knowing about the Rescue Triangle will help Co-Counsellors to become more aware of when they are acting in controlling ways. Knowing about the Rescue Triangle will help the new Co-Counsellor to move towards being in charge of him/herself and will help to leave others in charge of themselves.

One of the basic principles of Co-Counselling is that people are responsible for themselves. This holds both for sessions and in socialising. If I need something, it is my responsibility to ask for it. If I don't want to do something I can say 'no'.

4. Building confidence

The more confident people feel with their Co-Counselling, the more likely they will explore the opportunities on offer in Co-Counselling. Three aspects are important here: clienting confidence, counsellor confidence and last but not least the confidence to ask for what one needs.

Developing this confidence takes much more than can be offered during the Fundamentals. The development of Counsellor confidence can be quite easily supported during the Fundamentals. I present the counsellor role as basically an attitude, not a skill to be learnt. “Being present for your client”, “Being at ease with the client” count for at least 80% of the counsellor role. Most students pick this up very intuitively. The other 20% consist of counsellor’s skills that people pick up when clienting. However these skills are rendered useless if the underlying attitude of being present for your client is not there. It is this emphasis on attitude instead of skills that helps people very much to relax into their counsellor role.

Secondly the above mentioned meeting with experienced Co-Counsellors is also helpful. Here they realise that “being present for the client” is enough as the experienced Co-Counsellors actually run their sessions themselves. This is the great benefit of the “client in charge” attitude.

5. Extra support outside the main course

Some people pick up Co-Counselling more easily than other people. On occasions when I saw people having difficulties picking up Co-Counselling during the Fundamentals, I offered them free extra tuition sessions with me. Also after the Fundamentals they were sometimes offered regular Co-Counselling sessions with one of the teachers. Generally these extras supported them to settle into Co-Counselling.

Q4. What is available to new Co-Counsellors in Scotland that might support them to settle in to Co-Counselling?

As said before, Co-Counsellors vote with their feet. Most new Co-Counsellors seem to prefer to have sessions, need to meet other Co-Counsellors to find partners, attend workshops and organise the support they need.

1. Workshops

Facilitated workshops

- **CoCoPlus day workshops**

These monthly workshops (9 a year) offer a link between Co-Counselling and other ways of working such as focusing, interrupting negative thoughts, using voice, body movement, thus supporting the development of clienting skills. Or there is a link offered between Co-Counselling and specific aspects of life, like loss & bereavement, relationships, sexuality etc.. The facilitators are both experienced facilitator and skilled (often professionally) in their particular area. Because of their variety they appeal to quite varied audience of Co-Counsellors.

- **Too Big Issue’ workshop over 8 evenings**

When people finish their Fundamentals, often they still do not believe they can use Co-

Counselling for really big issues. For that you need a 'real' therapist, so they think. This workshop is set up to show Co-Counsellors how they can work systematically on a big issue over a period of 8 weeks. Most Co-Counsellors who have done this workshop are still in Co-Counselling.

- **Residential, Facilitated Weekend Workshops**

At least twice, often 4-5 times a year these workshops are organised on a similar basis as the CoCoPlus workshops.

Peer led workshops

- **Community Days or Open Co-Counselling Days**

These are organised on a monthly base (12 a year) and provide mainly opportunities for sessions in pairs or in groups. In the early nineties they were very well attended, numbers were regularly around fifteen people. With the increase of the ongoing support groups and other attractive alternatives attendance at them has diminished. New people seem to attend them only once.

- **Residential Peer Workshops**

Since 1991 there have been at least 2 residential workshops of a weekend or longer in Scotland. In the beginning there were the SummerWeek and New Year Workshop. These were gradually replaced by the McCoCo (long CCI-UK weekend) and Lauriston Hall (week) workshops that attract Co-Counsellors from outside Scotland as well.

- **Peer Day workshops with a theme**

The organiser of a workshop of this type publishes the theme in the newsletter and asks other Co-Counsellors to join and to share their experiences related to that theme. The facilitation of that group is shared with the group and often decided on the day itself. Themes have been: "Women in middle age", "Shyness", "Coping with depression". I consider this types of workshops as an example of Co-Counsellors taking responsibility for their own needs. How can Co-Counsellors be supported to do this more?

- **'How to run a workshop' workshop**

Although this workshop does not immediately support new Co-Counsellors to settle into Co-Counselling, its spin-off does. It encourages more experienced Co-Counsellors to run workshops during the residential workshops or to organise a peer group with a theme. This benefits in turn the new Co-Counsellors. Anne Denniss and I ran that workshop at least once a year, often twice.

2. Long Term Support Groups

As I said before, long term support groups are crucial for Co-Counselling. They not only provide

Co-Counsellors with a regular support base and with the opportunity to experiment with their social skills and by doing so developing more functional relating skills. This deepens the sense that Co-Counselling 'works'. In this way these long term support groups eventually provide Co-Counselling with committed volunteers skilled in relating to other people. Therefore I see encouraging Co-Counsellors to join or set up a long term support group, as a cornerstone policy of creating a healthy Co-Counselling network.

Start up workshop

Here I try to explain how new support groups can give themselves the best possible start up for a long and healthy life. One of the most important pre-conditions is that each candidate is confident with their clienting and counselling skills. People need to be able to work on what it brings up to be a group member. Also they need to know what group dynamic difficulties they are likely to meet and how the group can prevent the group dynamics from overpowering the individuals. In other words, how each group member can make sure that the group keeps meeting their needs.

Most support groups who attended this workshop and stuck to the recommendations or experimented skilfully with them, have now been running for several years. Also they are now providing the core of volunteers who keep the network running in difficult times.

3. Trust Persons

Where people deal with people, things can sometimes go wrong between them. Often Co-Counsellors can cope themselves, whether or not in a Co-Counselling session.

However, new people especially sometimes need to share or discuss with someone else the difficulties they are having with another Co-Counsellor. A Co-Counselling session is not always sufficient and is not an appropriate communication tool for sharing. Sometimes people need to hear about different ways of handling the relationship or of clienting.

Trust Persons come in here. They are obliged and committed to full confidentiality. If necessary, they can consult or ask each other for support without mentioning names. Their first task is listening, complemented by suggestions that empower people to deal with the problem themselves. It is only as the last resort that they get involved in 'conflict resolution' meetings, if requested.

Although the system of Trust Persons has its limitations in managing conflicts in the network, it has supported several new Co-Counsellors to find their way in Co-Counselling.

Q5. What other things have been tried to help new Co-Counsellors settle in?

Buddy System

At one time we ran a buddy system for new Co-Counsellors. During the last weekend when experienced Co-Counsellors came into the Fundamentals, new Co-Counsellors were offered the

opportunity to choose an experienced Co-Counsellor as a buddy to have sessions with for a certain period. In the rare cases that this offer was taken up, it was quite successful. However, the take up was very low and not really worth the effort to get it organised in this way. It doesn't diminish however, my impression that when a new Co-Counsellor pairs up with an experienced one, this often results in a good settling into Co-Counselling. Therefore the question remains for me, how we can encourage this pairing up?

List of experienced Co-Counsellors who are willing to have sessions with new people

In the Co-Counselling newsletter there is a list of names of experienced Co-Counsellors who are willing to have sessions with new people. In reality new Co-Counsellors hardly made use of this list. However, having a list, whether or not it is used, signals a welcome to new Co-Counsellors.

A peer review group

Sometimes a Fundamentals group gels well together, sometimes not. In the last case it is not useful to suggest to them to come together for a set amount of time for revision of the Fundamentals stuff. For the groups who did gel together, a review group did not really work. The groups started quickly to socialise and with the exception of some individuals, most people disappeared from the Co-Counselling scene. For me an indication, that too early socialising can be an important factor why people don't get really settled into Co-Counselling.

Q6. Is there anything else that you think is relevant?

Teaching Co-Counselling is more than teaching Fundamentals alone.

It is very seductive to believe that teaching Co-Counselling only involves teaching Fundamentals. I know from my own experience what hard work it is first to find people for the Fundamentals and then to teach them. Often I have breathed a sigh of relief at the end of the Fundamentals. However, it is my belief that teaching Co-Counselling Fundamentals is nothing like enough. Rather, taking the Fundamentals course is the beginning of a new Co-Counsellor's progress via post-Fundamentals support into long term support groups and ultimately into facilitating their own workshops. Of course not every new Co-Counsellor has to go through this development. But if teachers don't have their eye on this long term perspective, almost no new Co-Counsellor will follow this path.

In support of this belief, all you need to do is have a look at areas with teachers who believe that Fundamentals is all that is needed. You will often see that depending on their efforts and the local situation quite a lot of people take up Co-Counselling, but they don't stick to it in the longer term. More importantly there is no development of a core of committed volunteers who will eventually keep their network going and lighten the task and responsibilities of the teachers.....
