



A co-operative inquiry into Co-Counselling as a personal Development Method

J. Nichol, “**A co-operative inquiry into Co-Counselling as a personal Development Method**”, University of London, London, 1993.

Summary

The work has three objectives. The first is to evaluate co-counselling using an experiential research model known as co-operative inquiry. The second is to reflect on the research process itself, and to look at the ways we think about knowledge and construct patterns of meaning. The third is to place the enterprise in the context of fundamental beliefs about health and health development. The study as a whole is therefore a personal document rather than a collective one: it is not a report from the inquiry group on its findings.

About the method

Co-operative inquiry is concerned with the subjective experience of human beings in the process of supported change and development. It is also democratic; the subject of the research is not distinguished from the researcher – differences of power and status are removed. So are the pretensions of the researcher to be a disinterested party somehow outside the process. Rather, the research adopts the stance of *critical subjectivity*, insisting that valid inquiry is based on a very high degree of self-knowing, self-reflection and co-operative criticism. The inquiry under consideration was based on six key criteria:

1. Avoid reductionism by using the lived experience of the whole person in the research, including their own capacity for self-determination
2. Avoid scientific rituals and mannerisms which appear objective whilst neglecting to question their own fundamental assumptions
3. Generate an open and democratic relationship between the researchers and subjects, making subject co-researchers and researchers co-subjects.
4. Honour feelings and intuition and allow people to reflect on and tell their own stories
5. Acknowledge the provisional and relative nature of ‘reality’ in human experience (the map is not the territory). At the same time strive to recognise and thereby create in that experience elements of underlying pattern and form.
6. Retain the scientific ideal of a critical and public knowledge, generated through the disciplines of rigorous self-reflexivity and rigorous group process (i.e. the proposition-experience-review

The group and its work

A total of fifteen people were contacted in September and October of 1992. Eight agreed to take full part in the inquiry and another four to take part in a preliminary questionnaire and review of the questionnaire responses. They were all people who had at least two years experience of CCI co-counselling including some role in teaching and all had significant experience of personal work outside the co-counselling arena.

The first task of the participants was to respond to an open-ended questionnaire about their involvement with co-counselling. The second was to study the full set of responses to get to know more about each other's perspectives, to identify pertinent issues for the inquiry, and to offer specific suggestions about the inquiry programme. The final activity was the inquiry itself, which took place over the weekend of 5-7 February at the Bonnington Centre in Vauxhall. The Friday evening was reserved for group building; the substantive inquiry ran between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m. on the Saturday and Sunday and was videotaped on camcorder. Some uncertainties and changers of plan meant that four women and five men took part in the group building session and first day of the inquiry but that one of the men was not present on the Sunday. The group generated, explored and reviewed three propositions relevant to the overall subject – one concerned with *free attention* and the other two with aspects of *discharge*. In each case, the group spent a period of time refining a specific proposition to act as a focus for the inquiry, then devised an experiential process to test (or explore) the proposition, and ended with a review of what had been experienced and learned. The three propositions were:

1. It is possible to identify different qualities of free attention that are enabling to the client in different ways
2. Discharge is an effective psychosomatic process for coming into the present
3. A complementary process of co-counselling discharge and meditation is a way to access a fundamental distress around identity/ego

The inquiry data are therefore as follows: replies to questionnaires, notes offering suggestions for the inquiry programme, the complete set of videotapes and written transcripts, and my personal memory of the experience as a participant. My own work used a mix of five research methodologies:

- An historical account of the development of co-counselling in the context of humanistic psychology
- An analysis of questionnaire responses
- Co-operative inquiry using a quasi-experimental approach

- Co-operative inquiry using hermeneutic methods (identified as intersubjective discussion amongst a community of concerned interpreters)
- Discipline reflection on my own experience

Setting the scene

The completed questionnaires provided a fascinating insight into respondents' introduction to co-counselling and the part it has played in their lives. Eight of the twelve respondents first learned about co-counselling through personal contact – five from friends and acquaintances, two through existing groups (women's and men's consciousness-raising) and one from their therapist. Of the remaining four, two had enrolled in classes with co-counselling specifically in mind,, and the other two with something else in mind (pastoral skills and assertiveness) at least in the first instance. The specific impulse to do co-counselling varied from 'curiosity' to 'desperation'. Most people were primarily interested in the opportunity to do personal work; the learning of counselling skills took second place.

The responses make it clear that co-counselling has been a transformative experience for almost everyone in the group. They have become different people as a result of their involvement with co-counselling. The participants in the research report that their ordinary experience of the world, their practices, their values and beliefs have undergone a permanent shift as a result of the co-counselling process. The essential changes have been emancipatory and empowering; to this extent co-counselling is already being vindicated as a significantly beneficial personal development method.

At the same time co-counselling has not been a complete system of personal development for anyone in the group. Given that the group was partly recruited for its experience of other ways of working, this is hardly a surprising discovery. But it is interesting that nine of the twelve participants took up their other work after co-counselling because of developmental needs which co-counselling itself was not able to meet. For two of these nine people, the new work has been in other forms of counselling and personal change work; for another two, it has been the practice of meditation; for the other five, it has included both. Of the three people whose other work began after they started co-counselling, two were on spiritual paths which included the practice of meditation, and the other was involved in bodywork. None of these activities has been abandoned in favour of co-counselling; for all participants in the research, co-counselling has been a piece in a larger developmental jigsaw.

The questionnaire replies emphasise a very high value placed by participants on the peer principle within co-counselling practice. There is unanimous support for the idea of reciprocal exchange within the co-counselling partnership with clients in charge of their sessions, supported by counsellors whose main job is to give free attention. There is more difficulty with the practice of the peer principle in the development of the Community as a whole. Drawing on the experience of

the London Community over a ten year period, participants report a feeling of frustration and disappointment. But there is no suggestion that the idea of an autonomous, self-managing Community is a bad one: the complaint is that it is undeveloped and that issues about leadership and decision making need to be addressed more consciously and intentionally. In this respect the problem is perceived to be a limitation in the way the peer principle is actualised, not in the principle itself.

Concerning the issues examined in depth by the inquiry – *free attention* and *discharge* – the questionnaire replies reveal very high levels of appreciation for the *free attention* concept and related ideas of present time awareness and unconditional positive regard. By contrast – and perhaps surprisingly for a group of experienced co-counsellors – there is a marked ambivalence around the co-counselling orthodoxy which holds that *discharge* is the primary engine of transformation. These issues are discussed at more length in my report on the inquiry work itself.

Creating an agenda

Participants were first asked to make suggestions for inquiry topics in the questionnaire and then to look at the full set of replies and construct agenda which reflected the concerns which seemed to be coming through. This resulted in a total of eleven possible agenda items, of which four were suggested by more than one person:

- Aspects of co-counselling and the spiritual (eight people)
- The role of discharge in co-counselling (six people)
- Interpersonal and group processes in co-counselling (four people)
- The role of free attention in co-counselling (two people)

The feedback was given to inquiry members and used in the process which generated the actual agenda on Friday evening. The final list was presented to the group for reconsideration on Saturday morning:

FREE ATTENTION

THE DISCHARGE PROCESS

AS HEALING

AS ALTERED STATE

COMBINING SESSIONS AND MEDITATION

THE GROUP LEVEL

1. UNITY/SEPARATION
2. CUTTING THE CRAP

3. INTIMACY AND INTENSITY
4. GROUP MIND

CO-CO COMMUNITY AND CO-CO CULTURE

The inquiry group worked through the topics in roughly the order listed. The whole of the first day was spent looking at free attention and the whole of the second day exploring discharge. Both topics were covered in a way that kept the possible relationship between co-counselling and meditation in mind, though in the event there was no long session which combined co-counselling and meditation as a working method. Given the choice to prioritise the work on free attention and discharge, there was no time to work on the group and Community issues also listed in the agenda. The result is that the group went some way towards addressing the whole of its agenda around individual co-counselling work, but did nothing to address collective issues at either group or Community level.

Inquiry into *Free Attention*

The proposition agreed after an initial discussion was:

It is possible to identify different qualities of free attention that are enabling to the client in different ways.

The exercises and working method chosen for the experiential phase reveal the group's understanding, at this early stage, of the meaning of co-operative inquiry. There is a clear sense of the exercise cycle as an experiment designed to establish truths about free attention, rather than a heuristic device providing a structure for open exploration. This sense is reinforced by the decision, when the exercises were set up, to split the group into two pairs working experientially and five observers. The experience of the people working would be checked by another set of people looking at the process from the outside – an obvious concession to the style, if not the substance, of conventional science.

The exercises were as follows:

- A conventional free attention contract
- A session in which counsellors gave poor attention
- A session which was preceded by a period of meditation
- A session in which counsellors closed their eyes followed by a session in which clients closed their eyes
- A session in which clients and counsellors gave each other free attention and shared passing thoughts followed by a session of silent mutual free attention
- Sessions in which clients received silent free attention from the whole group

In the review of the exercises, there was general agreement that the baseline free attention

session had been successful. Both clients had used their counsellor's attention to work and to get into discharge. Moreover, the effect of the withdrawal of that attention had been so marked, especially in one case, that in spite of the crudity of the exercise, its results were seen as significant.

It was agreed the free attention session following the period of meditation had a different quality from the original one, as if something had been added. There were several possible reasons for this. The client might have changed through their own meditation; the counsellor might be offering a different quality of free attention; counsellor and client might be in closer rapport because of the shared activity of meditation. It was therefore not possible to say that the counsellor's attention offered a different kind of enablement to the client, but it was possible to say that the process as a whole did.

The unsighted sessions provoked considerable discussion, but it was felt that the exercise itself was too artificial to draw any sustainable solutions.

Mutual free attention was seen as outside co-counselling. Where there was permission to express thoughts, the process was seen as both exciting and as potentially dangerous. It had the power to enable both intimacy and abuse. In terms of the overall inquiry topic, the boundaries of co-counselling, with the defined roles of counsellor and client, could be thought of in this context either as a limitation (inhibition) or as a benefit (protection). But it was clear that this form of free attention had a quality that could enable interpersonal exchange, the growth of intimacy or shared present time awareness.

Mutual free attention without words, whilst also outside co-counselling, was seen as more compatible with the tradition and, like meditation, something that could be assimilated into the culture. All participants found it a profoundly healing experience with a character unlike any of the other exercises. Quite clearly, it was a quality of free attention which enabled something different to the free attention in session work.

Group attention was confirmed as especially powerful compared to individual attention, capable of enabling dynamic forms of work.

Overall the idea of free attention was recognised as having implications beyond its technical appropriateness in the counselling role, raising a number of questions about states of consciousness and states of relationship. There seemed to be a clear link with rapport, as defined in NLP practice, and mindfulness, as understood in certain forms of (largely Buddhist inspired) meditation. The free attention idea was seen as something very precious within co-counselling, and also as an element of the tradition which could be independently usable. In relation to the practice of co-counselling itself, the inquiry group agreed that the preparation for paired groupwork would benefit from short periods of meditation and mutual free attention.

Inquiry into *Discharge*

The central method of the co-counselling tradition, the *discharge and re-evaluation* process, was the focus of considerable thought both within the completed questionnaire responses and within the inquiry weekend. The questionnaire brings out the fact that the ability to discharge is a valued skill: it is accepted as a way of achieving emotional release in a context of respectful attention and making a cognitive link with what is being released. As such, it is seen as contradicting the kind of cultural incompetence which teaches people to fear and repress emotional expression and deny its worth and transformative power when such expression occurs. It is a way of being emotionally literate.

What many of the respondents question is the continued regular long-term practice of the discharge and re-evaluation process once this lesson has been learned and practised over a period of time. Once feelings have been reintegrated into the psyche and some major work on personal distress patterns completed, does the method retain its full value? The belief of most participants in the research is that it does not and that it tends to become subject to a law of diminishing returns. More specifically, respondents suggest that discharge can become the source of an addiction to a somatic buzz, or an attachment to the very distress which it is intended to lead the co-counsellor away from, thereby losing its effectiveness as a vehicle for change. Seven of the eight people who have been involved in co-counselling for ten years or more, including all of the accredited teachers in the group, report this experience – which in effect puts their experience at odds with orthodox co-counselling theory on this point.

The inquiry's consideration of discharge began with a test of the ten minutes mini session as a form of emotional house-cleaning, using the proposition:

Discharge is an effective psychosomatic process for coming into the present.

The word 'psychosomatic' was included to register the group's understanding that a true catharsis requires a mental component (e.g. a sense of loss) as well as a physical one (e.g. sobbing). This time there were no observers – everyone was involved, and seven out of the eight people did discharge work in their sessions. Of the six who talked about it afterwards, all experienced greater vitality and an enhanced present-time awareness as a result of their sessions, albeit two only

marginally. However, the group decided to categorise this process as 'maintenance discharge', a valuable resource in personal management, carrying a state-altering potential in the short term, but not a transformative or developmental experience. This was distinguished in particular from the major, spontaneous catharsis that can be triggered by conditions of acute personal distress and shake up a person's whole identity. The group's thought was that the latter process was extremely valuable but tended to diminish both in intensity and significance with increasing experience, probably because the ego becomes immune to it.

Consideration of the relationship between ego and consciousness lead to the formulation of the inquiry's third proposition:

A complementary process of co-counselling discharge and meditation/contemplation is a way to access a fundamental distress around identity/ego.

The proposition arose because two people believed that co-counselling commonly had the effect of building up the ego and its preoccupations in a way that ran counter to the true evolution of consciousness. But they also suggested that it had the potential to work beneficially, by challenging ego as a limiting self-construct and thereby opening a path to transpersonal illumination. Some people thought that this might be accomplished through discharge work alone: others believed that it might best be approached through a mix of discharge work and meditation. The central idea accepted by the group in this discussion was that people forge their identity in early childhood in the context of distress, some of this being inevitable to the process and some being imposed externally. Personal identity therefore becomes narrowly ego-bound and defended, both repressing the body and feelings **and** denying the potential for transcendence.

The experiential work undertaken to explore this proposition comprised one long session by one individual, supported by the rest of the group. By this stage, the group had moved away from a quasi-experimental model of working. The kind of concepts being scrutinised were obviously not amenable to this approach and its implied hope of discovering a fixed truth by broadly empirical methods. The enterprise became an attempt by the group to discern a coherent pattern in its shared experience rather than a collection of evidence designed to establish a correct theoretical perspective. Having said that, the session did seem to most members of the group to validate the capacity of regression work to uncover a fundamental level of distress out of which the limited vehicle of consciousness we call personality is developed. However the discharge work was incomplete, being more than the usual maintenance discharge and less than a cathartic transformation; meditation was not used. Furthermore, although the session was successful in terms of psycho-archaeology, identifying and making conscious the roots of this distress, it did not in itself create any real change in my perceptions (I was the client) either at the time or in the longer term.

The questioning of the discharge and re-evaluation process in this research has led me to

conclude that CCI is impoverishing itself for want of any credible mechanism for revising theory. CCI has inherited RC theory and, having added a few additional ideas during its first days as a separate Community, it is now (1993) theoretically static. This has been the case since at least 1979, when I joined. Community members have permission to work in other ways when they contract to do so, but this does not feed back into the formal theoretical position of the organisation or influence the way in which co-counselling is taught, since obviously everyone needs to be introduced to co-counselling through the same core curriculum. In particular, there is no platform to launch a critique of the total commitment to a discharge and re-evaluation approach to the work. There is no institutional forum even for a discussion, since there are no appropriate institutions – no real CCI. Consequently the experience of people who move beyond (or at least away from) this model as their predominant way of working cannot be recognised or validated and the Community itself, stuck in a kind of 1970's time warp, may begin to decay through its inability to reassess and develop theory in any recognised collective way.

CCI and radical humanism

One of the arguments of the overall research is that CCI co-counselling can be located within the mainstream of the humanistic psychology movement, and that this movement itself has a set of common perspectives which add up to a coherent view of health. This humanistic idea of health is focused on the developmental needs of the person – whether physical, mental, emotional or spiritual. Indeed the person is a single system, so even these distinctions should be treated with caution. The basic pre-condition for health is that the human organism should be allowed to change and develop in those ways that are natural for it. The problem as perceived by humanistic psychology is that human beings in present day society tend to be at a relatively low point on the continuum because their socialisation has brought about distortions in development leading to the creation of false and maladaptive ways of being. This being so, the tendency of the distress distorted collective is to hold individuals firmly in their own distress distorted place.

This places humanistic psychology in one of the four warring camps (academically called *paradigms*) mobilised around a particular set of beliefs around mental health promotion. These are;

1. *Functionalism*

This adopts an objective approach to knowledge and an acceptance of social norms. It is the stance of Western medicine, where mental illness is diagnosed and treated primarily as an organic condition, of behaviourist psychology and the Department of Health.

2. *Interpretive analysis*

This approach continues to accept social norms, but validates forms of learning derived from the subjective experience of individuals; mental health is achieved through the conscious

unpacking of internal conflicts. This is the approach of psychoanalysis and some other therapies.

3. *Radical humanism*

The honouring of subjective experience is taken further. Society is now seen as a source of disempowerment and as stunting the development of human potential. This is the perspective of humanistic psychology and of CCI.

4. *Radical structuralism*

Social oppression is seen as fundamental and as objectively determined. Ultimately, mental health requires the ending of all systemic oppressions. This is the stance of Marxist mental health and RC.

It is noteworthy from the research that the more successful energies of CCI seem to be in the individual work rather than the collective life of the Community. If CCI is a radical humanist movement, where is its radicalism? The simple answer is that it retains radical beliefs; in particular, it sees the peer principle as fundamental both to the counselling process and to the development of the Community. It also sees distress as flowing as much from the success of our initial socialisation as from its failure.

There is a more complex answer, which I think has two elements. The first involves the admission that there has been a real falling away from radicalism at the level of external politics. The ideas behind CCI were developed in the 1940s, 50 and 60s. CCI itself (as of 1993) is the product of the last 20 years and shares their history. Within this period, activities such as counselling and the exploration of individual, group and organisational dynamics have become widely acceptable in a variety of personal and professional contexts. Meanwhile on the wider political stage there has been a dramatic shift to a more individualistic and less socially responsible ideology and practice whilst at the same time state institutions have become less participative and more authoritarian. In a climate where personal development, at least for middle class people, is in some sense rewarded and collective efforts are blocked or punished, it is not surprising to find that co-counsellors are better at therapy than they are at community building.

However there is a more positive side to the introspective mood of CCI co-counsellors in the current historical phase. This lies in the opportunity to revisit the roots of the political problem in another way, and draw out some political implications from the inquiry group's consideration of ego. Egoic consciousness confers many benefits: rational comprehension, formal operational thinking, self-reflexivity, the potential for mutual recognition and esteem, a discriminating and internalised morality and a legally recognised self-consciousness. But it is also a vulnerable construct, guilty in its emergence, open to anxiety and aware of its mortality. Such a combination of superficial mental competence and underlying terror leads to necessary distortions –

competition, inequity and exploitation at the level of material and emotional-sexual relations, and a drive to rob others of equal recognition and esteem by forcing one's own ego to be number one. One view of what happens in the best and most developed therapy is that we break out of the imprisoning shell of the ego, shedding the fundamental fear and attachment that drives distorted desire. Working on the issue of ego may seem like a rarefied and other-worldly activity. Yet it could be placed at the heart of sane social change.

Topics

CoColInfo Tags:

Literature tag:

[Organising co-counselling events](#) > [Thinking and/or deciding together](#) > [Co-operative enquiry](#)

[More about Co-Counselling theory and practice](#) > [Developing Co-Counselling theory & practice](#)
