



## Social dynamics in co-counseling

D. Headen, "**Social dynamics in co-counseling**", 1999.

When we meet in a group of co-counsellors, we do not have any method of being clear about our social reactions with each other. The method of co-counselling is fine for our own personal enlightenment, but our understanding of how we interact with each other is not examined. I would like to start a dialogue about the problems which arise within the co-counselling community, and indeed in other close knit social groups.

I come from the Irish community, where I saw that if the balance of power is not maintained between the leaders and the members of the community itself, that the group faded away. It is important that every member of the group feels equally empowered to raise his voice and join in the dialogue/. This did not happen in the Irish community, and it is now reduced to a very small number of people.

We humans are social animals. We love to be together a lot of the time. We are no different from any other group of social animals. In every group some individuals assume power. Some try to take it from them., Some animals because of their status can take more mates. Some cannot, and feel resentful. In some extreme cases some animals kill their own species. There has tended to be a view in co-counselling circles that humans are the only species that kill each other, but this has been disproved many times in studies of animals. (See for instance Wilson, *On Human Nature*, London 1994) The normal emotions of love, anger, jealousy, envy, caring, self sacrifice apply to other social animals as to humans. Co-Counselling helps us to accept these emotions in ourselves as being instinctual in man for the last two million years, and before that in other species for further millions of years.

Power is at the centre of any of our social structures. Different people have it to a different degree. Some have open power. They are acknowledged leaders, and can control and ruin others, or elevate them if they wish. There is a power over resources, those with wealth can avail of choices that the poor can not have. Some have power behind the scenes, they can influence others to form pressure groups to do things. There is sexual power, whereby people can attract and influence others. And there is emotional power, where people can control others, either directly and openly, or indirectly and manipulatively.

Co-counselling attracts people who are very often in an emotional crisis, looking for direction in their lives. They have not yet come to terms with their need for power in their own lives, and in a social context. As the individuals become more at ease, then certain alliances form. This is good, it

provides support and a caring group within which to experiment and grow. I have heard many people at this point in the community say that they only feel safe with other co-counsellors, that outside in the "real world" people are aggressive selfish and uncaring.

Unfortunately, we in co-counselling are no different. That is why we need a model of how a social group works so that we can understand when things are not running smoothly that it is not because suddenly somebody "bad" is in our midst, but because the age old struggle for survival is continuing. I have been in Co-counselling since 1983, and in that time I have seen a number of individuals expelled because they did not conform to some particular rule or other. I think it is sad if the community is thinned or lessened by expelling members every now and then. What happens then is that we end up with a very few like minded people in each country, and co-counselling is not growing.

Anyone who has joined co-counselling and stayed, is interested in going on the same journey. It is a journey of truth about our emotions. It is a journey of having a choice, once we understand what is happening to us. It is a journey of throwing off the inhibitions of society when they are harmful to us.

Within that group who are going on the same journey, there will be many who have different views of the world, catholic, protestant, jew, new age, spiritual, atheist. I clearly remember at the teachers' workshop in Harlech when John Heron introduced his co-creating ideas, that he asked that we should all tolerate each others' point of view.

The only two things that we ask in Co-counselling are that people 1.- Give free attention in a session 2.-keep confidential what they hear in a session. As far as these two things go, I know very good co-counsellors who have not been able to give free attention at some times in their lives, and are yet wonderful role models, and very good co-counsellors.

As to the second, the great rule for me in co-counselling is "Make yourself safe" If you do not feel that your confidence will be kept, don't counsel with that person. Everyone has a right to say no. And if you divulge information, you know that it may not be 100% safe, but you take that risk because your need to counsel on it is so strong you know that you will gain more from exploring it than from keeping it to yourself. It always strikes me as quixotic that at a CCI if you counsel with five people a day for six days, at the end of the week you will have been told intimate stories from many sources, so that at the end of the time the element of total confidentiality is lessened anyway, although no one is talking about these stories, but there is a great subterranean shared experience, and at the end a shared relief, when some of these stories are resolved.

We are all going the same way. We need to be accepting of each other in our journey. We need to turn our energies outwards to share the co-counselling vision of understanding our emotions with others.

And we need to recognise that we have the usual emotions as all other human beings. We are no

different. When people say that co-counsellors should have an elegant way of resolving disputes, look around you. It is not happening. So we need the usual tools of society to keep a balance of power, such as a constitution, protection in our rules for the minority, and tolerance of our differences. We need a strong community if we are to support each other. That includes tools for conflict resolution, not putting our energy into expelling each other, but accepting our differences and going forward together with our vision.

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