

✓

**DOCUMENT I: INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IN COUNSELLING:
REFLECTIONS**

INTRODUCTION

*My purpose is to tell of bodies which have transformed
into shapes of different kinds. You heavenly powers, since
you were responsible for these changes, as for all else, look
favorably on my attempts, and spin an unbroken thread of verse.*

~Ovid, Metamorphoses

The first two documents were prepared for discussion at the 46th Conference of the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance, February 5-8, 1998, Tampere, Finland. The first document presents 20 reflections on aspects of contemporary social life and about counselling. Part II is a narrative description of a constructivist version of a New Look in counselling designed for contemporary social life. These documents will introduce the reader to concepts in the New Look counselling¹ and together with subsequent documents 5 and 6, to the practice of New Look counselling. While these documents are interdependent in conceptualization, each can be read independent of the others as different readers may be so inclined.

Document 1: Part I

Ten critical reflections[for counsellors and their managers] on society at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries.

1 It is now a cliché that institutions and societies all over the world are undergoing, or have already undergone, significant transformations as part of evolution into global, post-industrial, commodified and market-driven societies. Every social structure change has direct and significant impact on the lives of individuals, just as the cumulative decisions of individuals influence the social structures. This is why for New Look counsellors, every personal problem is simultaneously a public issue and vice versa.

2 While it may be difficult, or impossible, to achieve satisfactory explanations of “why things are not as they used to be”, it is essential to realise that all of these macro transformations have a direct and significant impact on the day-to-day life of the individual. The patterns of influence may be largely invisible and unpredictable, yet they are real and can act as either constraints or niches of opportunity for individuals in their daily social life activities.

3 The influences of the macro on the micro(individual daily existence) are both fortuitous and harmful. Moreover, they are often quite unpredicted and introduce

¹ I have written a counsellor’s book on the New Look in counselling: Peavy, R.V.(1997) *SocioDynamic Counselling*. Victoria: Trafford Publishers. See website: www.trafford.com

uncertainty into the individual's life. Different individuals—largely due to social location—are affected in different ways by the same macro transformation. For example to become unemployed may have a devastating impact on one person and is an “opportunity” for a change to a more rewarding type of work for another.

4 Post-industrial worklife and, more generally, social life, is more uncertain, unpredictable, and changeable than was daily existence for the majority of citizens in the factory era of the 20th century. It is not so much that there is now more change—it is that there are more different kinds of change and changes occur more rapidly and frequently. In this coming century we face a “multiple choice” existence. However, we must learn how to navigate unpredictable conditions as we pursue our preferred choices. And it is to be remembered that some people, particularly the marginalized, face mostly bad choices when it comes to finding a niche in social life where a “good life” can be constructed.

5 Institutional changes in management and economic policy and modes of operation which are deemed necessary for the economic survival of institutions and corporations may reduce, or eliminate, the individual employee's eligibility to participate in social life. For example, a wage-earner may suddenly be dis-located from a position of economic viability (for self and dependents) to a location of near or real poverty. For this person, and his or her economic dependents, the doors to various types of participation in social life may immediately close. Most of the decisions which lead to the dislocation of the individual and the reduction of eligibility for participation in social life are beyond the reach and influence of the individual. One of the main goals of New Look counselling is to assist individuals' in their attempts to gain meaningful participation in social life.

6 At the close of the 20th century, most social orders are trying to move toward models of rationality in which the values of efficiency, quantification, calculation, predictability and control are increasingly applied to social life. Ritzer (1992) refers to this encroachment of rationality into the personal life space of individuals as the *MacDonaldisation of Society*¹. The fast-food restaurant symbolizes the cult of machine efficiency. Further, machine-cult values are surrounded by an attempt by corporations and advertising-dominated media to promote the illusion of “happy” consciousness in which everyone is supposed to “have a good day”—even if they have to take tranquilizers to achieve this state. Advocates of this rationalisation of society continue to have the modernist faith in progress so well-described by George Orwell in his *The Road to Wigan Pier*²

All the work that is now done by hand will then be done by machinery; wood or stone will be made of rubber, glass or steel; there will be no disorder, no loose ends, no wilderness, no wild animals, no weeds, no disease, no poverty, no pain—and so on and so forth...above all an ordered world, an efficient world. P. 189.

Some individuals who are trying to navigate social life where the virtues of rationality and economy are shaping human existence have the worst of two possible worlds. On the one hand they are subject to unpredictability and uncertainty beyond their control. On the other hand they are caught in a machine-value world where “life is supposed to be getting better and better” but is definitely not for various groups of have-nots and marginalised people. Further, other-directed niceness (Riesman)³ and happy consciousness (Marcuse) make authentic autonomy and resistance problematic

“because one cannot succeed in getting indignant at the nice and happy in a society based on simulation⁴.

7 It should not be overlooked that present-day social life is so organized that it does produce “good lives” that get better and better for some; it also produces *difference, exclusion, and marginalization* for others. Present-day institutions hold out the possibility of choice and emancipation; at the same time they create mechanisms of suppression, rather than actualization of self.⁵

8 Are there escape routes from the ensnaring phenomena of the rational machine-cult values? From the marginalization and exclusion(from participation in social life) that many individuals experience? From the nonemotional style of expression which says “be happy”, “I’m fine”, “enjoy” in the face of monumental evidence that one should be indignant and resistant? Or are the escape routes territories of exclusion and marginalization themselves simply co-opted by institutions and replaced by simulation?

9 Today it is impossible to think of individual existence apart from institutional life. In effect one’s life path is a trajectory across institutional contexts. The individual self is more and more by necessity a reflexively organized project. Each person is increasingly on his or her own both in the construction of a personal identity and self and in the navigation of institutional life. We are what we make of ourselves. Of course no one is free to do just what he or she chooses—we all face many constraints and contextual influences. Yet in the end we produce ourselves. Traditional guiding forces(clan, family, church, community) continue to evaporate—to be replaced by electronically-mediated influences. Life planning, risk-taking, trying-out, struggling to formulate paths for colonizing one’s future, extending one’s present into an imagined future--searching for escape routes out of marginalization, looking for sources of support—these factors make up some of the issues in forming a self-as-project.

10 Where and who are we today? Are we for the most part pawns; or do we have choices which are authentic and which enable us to carve out an existence as an “existent being” with a fair degree of autonomy? Do we ask the experts? Not one of them predicted the taking down of the Berlin Wall. Nor the precipitous breakup of the Soviet Union. What about the booming Asian economy of 1995-97 that went wildly unstable in late 1997? Was this widely predicted by economists? Or the crash of the peso in Mexico? Who predicted the phenomenon of AIDS? The increase of experts in medicine, psychology and science leads to an ever greater narrowness of specialization.? Yet everyone of these experts is a lay person in nearly all aspects of life.

Jean Baudrillard claims that one can learn more about America by driving down it’s highways than from all of the social science institutes⁶ in the country. This outrageous statements about the status of the expert escapes proof or disproof. It is reminiscent of Dostoevsky’s main character in *Notes from the Underground* who describes people as ‘piano keys’ and ‘doorstops’--earlier versions of the phrase ‘cogs in a machine’. The depictions of society and its members given to us by Dostoevsky and Baudrillard seem to stem from a desire to remain free, to refuse to be pinned down, categorized and pigeon -holed. Such depictions are annoying, confusing and yet they call to our attention that the unpredictable cannot be predicted; that the postmodern world may be little more than a collage of contingent, rootless, swirling fictions. At least we are brought to consider that contemporary social life is chaotic and disorderly even while the deterministic forces of the market and modernity present the illusion(simulation) of rational orderliness, progress, and efficiency. Perhaps the justification of New Look counselling is that those who practice it well may find useful ways of helping individuals to take charge of their own lives(at least to a greater extent

than the role of victim or helpless one implies); and find ways of aiding people to construct sustainable patterns and relationships in daily work and personal life.

Document 1: Part II

10 critical reflections on concepts which can be used to transform counselling into a 21st century practice.

1 The individual, situated in a shifting and uncertain context, must learn to exert direction over his or her life. If an individual fail to take charge of his or her life, someone else surely will. Each of us must see our self as a reflexively organized project. Our self-as-project[life planning endeavor] consists in the construction and sustaining of coherent, continuously revised, biographical narratives. Self-construction takes place in a context of multiple choices.

2 If counselling is be relevant to the formation of lives in the new century, it must be willing to submit to transformations. Like a snake it must be willing to shed its 20th century skin, even if that means being blinded, uncertain and searching for a time. As a practice counselling is rooted in biblical times. As a profession it is hardly more than half a century old. It came of professional age in the era of the factory and evolved a kind of Taylorized endeavor. Lately it has fallen under the sway of accountants and economists, thus subject to strident calls for more efficiency, more accountability, more specialization, more scientific status. These demands are a function of institutional fear and have nothing whatever to do with good counselling. Counselling remains the one practice within institutions where face-to-face discussion and problem-solving can be carried out on behalf of the interests of the individual.

3 The central claim of counselling is that it is a moral enterprise. As Rorty ⁷states, we have a duty to listen to the stories which people tell us, not because only they can know what they mean, but because they are human beings like ourselves. As social life has become more and more bureaucratized and subjected to institutional influence, counselling remains the one endeavor which can still par direct attention to individuals and their plights. Yet counselling has allowed itself to be co-opted into the service of institutions and, in doing so is increasingly in danger of losing its value for the individual. There is probably no way to free counselling from the demands of institutional management—however, it is possible to negotiate a more healthy relationship between counselling and institutional management. Before this can happen, however, counselling needs revision to put it into a posture of relevancy with people and how they experience their lives in the present time.

4 Humans live their lives much as stories are written and told; or to put it another way, stories have a very strong—even ruling--influence on our lives and on our societies. Counselling must move toward the knowledge contributions of culture studies and literary theory and reduce dependence on the iron-cage of psychology. Human lives are better described by Lyotard's metaphor of world-as-text ⁸than the metaphor of human life as a system of behaviors or system of cognition and behaviors as psychology uses. Even the endeavor of science can be seen as a kind of conversation and scientific texts have the status of voices in the conversation⁹

5 Any adequate understanding of human action must take into consideration: meaning, purpose, intentions, and reasons. Further, just as intentions are vitally important in understanding human action, we cannot understand intentions if we ignore the contexts in which they take place¹⁰.

6 When we adopt the concept of action as a replacement for the concept of behavior, we place the responsibility for action squarely on the shoulders of the actor(agent). Further we open up access to three important and relevant traditions of thought which can contribute to a new counselling for the coming century.

The first is literary theory(hermeneutics) as developed by Paul Ricoeur¹¹ who claims that meaningful action can be considered as a text, and vice versa. Meaningful action shares three constitutive features of a text. First, it becomes objectified by inscription(to set down in words so as to form a public record) and thus liberates it from the subjective grasp of the individual. Second, meaningful action has relevance beyond its immediate context of occurrence. Third, meaningful action can be read as an “open work” or set of performances. This extends the theory of interpretation to the field of social sciences and pragmatic practices like counselling.

The second important tradition which meaningful action opens for use by counselling theorists is phenomenology, introduced into the social sciences by Alfred Schutz¹² and his students Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman¹³. Phenomenology opens the door to study of direct, lived and reflected-upon experience. The ability to describe and interpret lived experience lies at the heart of the counselling process.

The third relevant tradition is the sociocultural approach to understanding humans and their actions. This interdisciplinary approach brings various threads into a loosely knit area of study which includes the activity psychology developed by Russian theorists such as Leont’ev¹⁴; the American sociologist and pragmatist Mead¹⁵; symbolic interactionism(Howard Becker¹⁶; Norman Denzin¹⁷); ethnomethodology(Harold Garfinkel¹⁸; Harvery Sacks¹⁹); and the discipline of narrative(Jerome Bruner²⁰; Donald Polkinghorne²¹) and voice(Michael Bahktin²²). What these disparate scholars share in common is an understanding that human action originates in cultural, social, communicative/linguistic processes.

7 To view human life as a voiced, narrative structure grounded in the actions of an actor-as-text requires unpredictability. This, according to MacIntyre²³ should not be regarded as a flaw but as a virtue since the kind of explanations which a constructive, narrative approach offer fit perfectly the kind of phenomena which they purport to explain. Most importantly, unpredictability does not imply inexplicability. Humans can account for their actions. All lives are lived with goals—which are created in the living. The most important aspect of goal-directed living is not so much the achievement of the goal, but the formulation and reformulation of goals. Lives are not defined at the outset, nor do they assiduously follow the directions(goals) provided by others. MacIntyre refers to the circular teleology of the lived life as the narrative quest. Life is a quest(creating goals as it is lived) rather than a search(for predefined goals).

According to Jerome Bruner, the “method of negotiating and renegotiating meanings by the mediation of the crowning achievements of human development”. In empirical science, explanations are achieved by recognising an event as an instance of a general law or as belonging to a certain discrete category. Narrative knowing, on the other hand, achieves explanations by relating events to human projects. “Narratives *exhibit* an explanation instead of demonstrating it.” Structurally, factual and fictive stories are similar. Their respective value or usefulness is situationally negotiated. Contingency, aesthetics, politics and plausibility all play a part in the negotiation of value with regard to narratives.

8 With reference to a given historical event, there can be an infinite number of stories(versions) portending to explain the event. It is not possible to use a criterial

method to categorically declare one version more true or better than some or all of the other versions. There is no way of deciding among them except by negotiation. When working with narratives and stories, one is not able to eliminate “error” and uncertainty by recourse to mathematical analysis or criteria. Instead one must use negotiation—which is itself contingent upon context. One may use reasons, evidence, temporal ordering to achieve a negotiated consensus or agreement. Certain influences can be discerned, and connections identified. But in the end, narrative knowing leaves open the exact nature of influence and connection. Determinacy cannot subordinate indeterminacy; causes may be inferred but not proven. Narrative knowing can bring counsellors close to life as it is lived, not life as it is calculated.

9 Counselling implies that the practitioner have **sociological competence**²⁴—this enables the counsellor to perceive that a personal problem is almost always also a public issue. Problems do not reside in the heads of individuals, but are to be found in the relational webs which we commonly refer to as social life, or, more broadly, culture and society.

10 Counselling is by nature a culture-centred practice. People seek the help of a counsellor when they are confused, thwarted, or hurt by social practices. Basically, they want help in answering the question, “What is going on here”, where *going on* refers to social things—patterns, processes, frames, relations—and *here* refers to their immediate on-going life space, context, situation or social location, all of which are culturally defined. For the past 50 years counselling has been under the domination of and individualistic, behavioural psychology. Counselling is culture-centred, and it is a specific social practice with its own competence. Psychological knowledge can make an important contribution to counselling but it should no longer dominate the practice of counselling.

This paper was organized and hand-written at Quinault Lodge, Olympic National Forest, 1997.

¹ Ritzer, George(1992). *The MacDonalization of Society*. London: Sage.

² Orwell, George(1937/ 1958). *The Road to Wigan Pier*. New York: Harcourt Brace.

³ Reisman, David(1950). *The Lonely Crowd*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

⁴ Mestrovik, Stejpan(1997). *Postemotional Society*. London: Sage.

⁵ Giddens, Anthony(1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

⁶ Baudrillard, Jean(1986). *America*. London: Versa, p. 55

⁷ Rorty, Richard(1982). *Consequences of Pragmatism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

⁸ Lyotard, Jean(1979/1986). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

⁹ Okeshott, Michael(1959/1991). The voice of poetry in the conversation of mankind. In *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*. 488-541. Indianapolis: Liberty Press.

¹⁰ Schutz, Alfred(1973). On multiple realities. In *Collected Papers I: The Problem of Social Reality*. 207-259. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

¹¹ Ricoeur, Paul(1981). The model of the text: Meaningful action considered as text. In John B. Thompson, ed. and trans., *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 197-221. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹² Schutz, Alfred(1973). On multiple realities. In *Collected Papers I: The Problem of Social Reality*, 207-259. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

¹³ Berger, Peter & Luckman, Thomas(1966). *The Social Construction of Reality*. New York: Doubleday.

¹⁴ Lenont'ev, A.N.(1981). The problem of activity in psychology. In *The Concept of Activity in Soviet Psychology*, ed. J.V. Wertsch. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe.

-
- ¹⁵ Mead, G.H.(1934). *Mind, Self, and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- ¹⁶ Becker, Howard(1970). *Sociological Work*. Chicago: Aldine.
- ¹⁷ Denzin, Norman(1989). *Interpretive Interactionism*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- ¹⁸ Garfinkel, Harold(1976). *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- ¹⁹ Sacks, Harvey(1992). *Lectures on Conversation*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- ²⁰ Bruner, Jerome(1990). *Acts of Meaning*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- ²¹ Polkinghorne, Donald.(1987). *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*. N.Y.: State University of New York Press.
- ²² Bakhtin, Michael(1981). *The Dialogic Imagination*. Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press.
- ²³ MacIntyre, Alasdair. (1981/1990). *After Virtue*. London: Duckworth Press.
- ²⁴ Lemert, Charles(1997). *Social Things: An Introduction to the Sociological Life*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.