

INTRODUCTION TO TALKING THERAPIES

The Talking Therapies Project aimed to nurture an ongoing conversation about the intersections, interactions and boundaries between counselling and psychotherapy on the one hand, and faith and spirituality on the other hand. To get conversations started, we shared stories about the development of counselling and psychotherapy in Scotland with some of the communities that had been involved in that history. These stories were drawn from an earlier research project entitled *Theology and Therapy*, a collaboration between the School of Divinity and Counselling and Psychotherapy at the University of Edinburgh. While the earlier project studied the role Christianity and “post-Christian” spiritual practices played in the development of counselling from 1945 to 2000, the Talking Therapies project sought to learn about the place of spirituality and faith in contemporary Scottish counsellors' lives and practices.

Faith : Spirituality : Counselling : Psychotherapy

Between November 2012 and April 2013, we held 16 workshops across Glasgow, Aberdeen, Stirling, Edinburgh, Inverness and St. Andrews, conversing with nearly 200 participants. Most of the people who attended our workshops were counsellors, trainee counsellors, or counselling trainers. However, we also worked with clergy, chaplains and members of faith communities. The discussions that emerged from these workshops were lively and rich, deeply personal and wide-ranging in their relevance.

THE WORKSHOPS

All of the workshops were organised along similar lines. We began with introductions, inviting each participant to say a few words about why they had made the time to attend. We also asked them to physically place themselves along three continuums expressing the importance of 1) religion in their upbringing; 2) religion in their lives today; and 3) spirituality in their lives today. These continuums provided a sense of the range and diversity of experiences present.

Having begun with participants' stories, we then connected back to the historical development of counselling, inviting them to share in reading out loud "Readers' Theatre" scripts. These verbatim scripts were based on oral history interviews completed as part of the original *Theology and Therapy* Project. We worked sometimes with monologues and sometimes with a full play featuring dialogue between eight characters.

After reading the scripts, we set aside time for individual quiet reflection on how the stories participants had read and heard related to their own lives and practices.

The remainder of the workshop was devoted to discussion. The discussion was relatively informal, touching on the scripts, the participants' own stories and the role that religion and spirituality does, could and should play in counselling and psychotherapy in Scotland today.

Shared Reading : Shared Reflection : Shared Discussion : Shared Knowledge

The workshops we facilitated ran from 1.5 hours to 5 hours in length. In our experience conversations about religion, spirituality and counselling could easily go on all day, but a minimum length of time needed for a satisfying workshop along the lines outlined above is approximately 2.5 hours.

THE SCRIPTS

The Readers' Theatre scripts we produced were based on oral history interviews conducted with 18 people key to the development of counselling and psychotherapy in Scotland from the 1960s through to the 1990s. The original interviews ranged in length from 1.5 hours to well over 4 hours. We used some of this material to create 5-minute monologues and later a fully dialogical play featuring eight characters and taking about 25 minutes to read out loud.

While these scripts were approximately 95% in the original words of the oral history subjects, they were obviously edited dramatically. In choosing which parts of the told stories to include, we looked for three things. 1) We included people's stories of origins--how they came to their faith or spiritual orientation and how they became counsellors. 2) We highlighted transition moments, for example when life stories came into conflict with the organisations people worked for. These points often marked the beginning of key contributions these figures made to the development of counseling services and counseling training in Scotland. 3) We looked for their "exit" stories, the points at which they left one profession and moved into another, for example from ministry to psychotherapy. Some people changed occupations multiple times, others stayed in their original profession until retirement. The resulting monologues represent in miniature narratives of their vocation and career.

Origins : Transitions : Exits

The dialogical play was more challenging to put together. It was based on our knowledge of the individual stories, gleaned from creating monologues, as well as upon those themes that were mentioned across multiple storied lives. To bring the dialogue to life, we tried to balance themes in which there was general agreement with those that provoked a range of contrasting responses.

By design, the oral histories focused on the role faith and spirituality played in people's lives. We chose to interview key figures who had ties to religious organisations and/or spiritual

traditions and we asked them to think about and articulate the place of faith and spirituality in their professional lives. Because of the specific cultural-historical configuration of Scotland in the second half of the twentieth century, The Church of Scotland was the most common affiliation of the people we did oral histories with, and almost all of the oral histories were centred on Christian faith.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

After reading and listening to the Readers' Theatre scripts, we asked workshop participants to engage in individual reflection using the following questions:

- 1) What in particular captures your attention and/or your imagination in what you've heard?
- 2) Are you drawn to the character whose monologue you have just read? Why or why not?

or

- 2) Which of the characters in the play are you drawn to and why?

WHAT CAME UP IN DISCUSSIONS

At the final workshop, which was a day-long event, we introduced a Readers' Theatre script that incorporated findings from all previous workshops (available on our website). "Part Three" of this script consisted of a discussion between three new characters, each of which represented a broad category of workshop participants. Using quotations from across discussion transcripts, we created an imaginary conversation between these fictional contemporary counsellors, each of whom represented one of the following orientations:

- 1) No connection to any specific faith or spiritual tradition, but open to understanding these as important to other counsellors' and clients' lives.
- 2) A sense of themselves as spiritual, but resistant to having spirituality defined.
- 3) Membership of a faith-based community as central to who they are as a person and as a counsellor.

The scripted conversation reflects the themes that came up over and over again in the workshops. While most of the participants had been exposed to religion as children, for the majority religion was no longer an important influence in their lives. However, at all workshops there were at least one or two participants for whom faith currently was very important. On the flip side, the majority of participants at every workshop indicated that spirituality was important to their current lives.

Many participants identified with the sense of counselling as a "calling", expressed in the scripts, although they might understand vocation variously through faith, spirituality or neither. For many, the practice of counselling connected to spirituality through a shared focus on intention, purpose and meaning-making. Some reported experiences they felt transcended the sum of the two individuals in the counselling room. How they chose to describe such experiences depended upon their faith or spiritual background, but many felt counselling enhanced their spirituality and vice versa.

Those few participants for whom a faith was central often expressed surprise at discovering others who felt the same way. Often these participants reported feeling uncomfortable disclosing their faith to other counsellors. Overall, there was a sense that more opportunities were needed both during and after training for counsellors to talk openly about religion and spirituality in a safe and supportive environment. Participants also acknowledged that religion and spirituality could be important to clients and wondered how their clients could be supported in bringing these areas of their lives into counselling sessions.

Despite many positive things said about faith and spirituality, discussions also touched on their shadow sides. Quite a few people mentioned negative experiences of organised religion, which had led to their rejection of faith. Participants variously reported experiencing religion as too rigid, too controlling, stifling, guilt-ridden, fear-mongering and used by some religious leaders as a means of wielding power. Some also reported having clients who had been "damaged" by organised religion. A very small number of participants remained skeptical of either religion or spirituality having any role in counselling.

While there was general acknowledgment that a counsellor's faith or spirituality could be an important source of support for them in their practice, there was a consensus that counsellors should never impose their faith or spiritual beliefs on their clients. Opinion around explicitly faith-based counselling was more mixed. The majority believed that matching faiths between counsellor and client was not necessary, with some pointing out that two people subscribing to the same faith might actually have very different beliefs and experiences. A few thought that if clients wanted to see a counsellor of the same faith, this should be facilitated.

Nonetheless, there was agreement that all counsellors (regardless of their faith, spirituality or none) must be mindful of and work through their experiences and beliefs related to religion and spirituality. Participants felt that failure to do so would put counsellors at greater risk of imposing their beliefs upon clients and might make it more difficult for them to be open to clients who wished to bring these aspects of their lives into the counselling room.

WHAT PARTICIPANTS SAID ABOUT THE WORKSHOPS

Almost a third of participants provided feedback, either by email or a short telephone interview, some time after they had attended a workshop. In their feedback, the vast majority of participants described workshops as insightful learning opportunities, thought-provoking and inspiring. They reflected upon the importance of being part of a safe community, of acceptance and of a sense of belonging in enabling them to share personal and collective experiences of spirituality and counselling. Many regretted that the workshop had not been long enough, reflecting that the discussion had only just begun to get going when it was time to leave. Specifically, they wanted more time to share personal stories with colleagues.

Although many wanted more time for discussion, most did not want this to come at the expense of the oral history material. The Readers' Theatre component of the workshops was well received overall. Participants expressed admiration for the pioneering work done by early counsellors and psychotherapists in Scotland and gratitude to them for sharing their deeply personal stories. A number of people reflected on what a privilege it is to hear another person's story. The sense these stories conveyed of life as a journey and of how people grow and change was at times inspiring and at others comforting. A few people expressed disappointment that the range of faiths dealt with in the scripts was limited compared to the range of faiths present in contemporary Scottish society.

“What struck me most about the workshop was the kind of parallels between the lives of many of the characters and my own. That was quite a powerful sense of seeing things from my own life reflected in their experiences.” – workshop participant

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

While our project has gone some ways towards opening up conversations about the role of religion and spirituality in counselling and psychotherapy, it has not even come close to meeting the demand in Scotland today for these sorts of discussions. Most of the workshops we organised were over-subscribed, with people being turned away, and many of those who did participate left wanting more.

We hope that this project will inspire practitioners and organisations to continue this conversation in ways small or large, formal or informal. A detailed guide to running a Talking Therapies workshop is available on our website, along with Readers' Theatre scripts and sample reflection sheets. You are welcome to make use of these resources in your own work, but please credit this project and let us know where these resources take you.

