

### Counselling session 4: the counsellor's congruence is challenged

Ania was in the waiting area. She had arrived before the appointment time. She noticed a poster on the wall, it was for an afternoon for people from Bosnia, an opportunity to meet people, make new friends, or just spend an afternoon. Children welcome. It appealed. She hadn't made many friends in England. The agency that had brought her over had put her in touch with people from her country, and she met up with some of them, but she was more interested in spending time with Maria. But there was something about the poster's wording that appealed. She noted down the time and the phone number for information.

She heard her name. It was Debbie's voice. 'Hi Ania, ready to come through?'

'Yes, hello Debbie, I was reading this poster. I could go to that.'

'Yes, I understand it has just started. It takes place here once a week. Very friendly. They play music and, well, it's an opportunity to connect and for people to perhaps speak their own language. I think it is very good.'

'I would like that, and Maria would meet new people as well. It says children are welcome.'

'Yes, it is very much a family afternoon.'

'Do I need to ask someone to come?'

'You can let Julie know at the desk, she will pass your interest on, and then just turn up.'

'I will think about it. Thank you.'

They went into the counselling room.

'So, how are things, Ania, how is Maria? I am very aware that when you called on the phone last week things were not easy.'

Is this directive? It has given the start of the session a focus, but it is also conveying unconditional positive regard towards Ania and her daughter, which is also important. It is reasonable that a client might expect such an enquiry. It raises an interesting question. Omitting to ask something at the start of a session might communicate a lack of empathy, warmth or

unconditional positive regard to a client who reasonably expects an enquiry as a result of something that has happened since the last meeting.

However, it would be inappropriate to ask about Maria if the phone call and cancellation of the previous session had not occurred.

'No, it was not good. But Maria is much better now. Thank you. She has drawn another picture for you. Ania took the picture from out of her bag. It is of you and me. I told her what you look like. I hope you like it.'

Debbie looked at the picture that Ania gave her. It had two people sitting in a room, with a table and the window and the orange curtains. And the green chairs.

'You have described the room to her.'

'Yes, and she would like to see it. Perhaps if we come to the afternoon, if the room is not in use, perhaps she could see? And she wants to see you as well.'

'That would be fine. If the door is open then I am free, if it is closed I have a client with me.'

'I will explain to Maria. Thank you.'

Debbie felt very touched by what Ania was saying. Maria was clearly alive to what was going on around her and for her mother. She wondered just how much she must pick up from her mother's sadness as well, however much Ania tried to keep it from her. She knew how sensitive children were, she knew how sensitive her own were. When she'd gone through a difficult period a few years back they just sort of were there for her, not really saying anything, but they just always seemed to appear and be around when she was upset. They had talked about it since and they had said that they knew that she was sad and that they wanted to try to make her happy again. She knew she felt quite emotional as thoughts arose briefly in her mind. But it did not feel appropriate to say anything about it.

'So, how do you want to use our time this afternoon, Ania?'

'I'm not sure. It was not easy after the last session and I wondered if this was helping me. But I know I have to do this. I just feel so sensitive, particularly loud noises and places where there are lots of people. I just feel very anxious at the moment.'

'More so than previously?'

'I think so.'

'So loud, sudden noises and places with lots of people, you feel very anxious.'

'I want to get away, to leave those places.'

'To get away.'

'To go home. I either want to go home, or go to the park, when it is quiet. I like to sit and watch Maria play, and feed the pigeons. But if there are too many people around then I want to go home.'

'It seems that you are very sensitive to too much happening around you.'

'Or something loud and unexpected. Like the noise here that time.'

Debbie nodded, 'yes.'

'I do not feel safe when there is noise and too many people.'

'Mhmm, and it has got worse.'

'Yes. I think so. But I have to go out. But I have to feel safe.'

'And if you do not feel safe then you have to leave, get away, go somewhere else.'

'That is right.'

'That can't be easy.'

'No, it is not.'

Debbie was struck by how the dialogue had become rather question and answer, it felt quite stilted. She wasn't sure whether this might be a language issue, or simply how Ania was feeling at the moment, not wanting to say very much for fear, perhaps, of where it might lead. It felt like she was perhaps speaking this way in order to keep control.

'And I guess it makes it difficult to feel in control when it is like that.'

This proves to be a therapeutically helpful response drawn from feelings that have arisen in the counsellor through the relational process with the client. It is therefore an appropriate expression of congruence.

'I like to be in control. Too many bad things have happened, too many things that I have had no control over.'

Debbie felt the atmosphere change, she sensed that Ania was holding an awareness of some of those bad things now, in this moment.

'Too many things, bad things, where you did not have any control.'

Ania shook her head and looked down. 'You have no control of bombs, where they will land, where you should be.'

'No, no, not knowing where they will land.'

The counsellor has not empathised with 'control' in this response, although the earlier comment may suffice as the client will know that the counsellor has an appreciation of the 'control' issue.

'It is a terrible thing to be under attack like that, in your own home, not knowing, but fearing. Trying to live your life, but not knowing.'

'Not knowing ...' Debbie picked up on the not knowing which Ania had repeated.

'You want to believe everything will be OK, that you will be OK, that those you love will be OK, but it is not necessarily so.'

'No, no. You want to believe, you try to believe, but bad things happen.'

'I do not believe people understand, unless they have sat there, hearing the explosions, waiting, just waiting.'

Is the client actually saying, 'your responses tell me that you do not understand'? It is an important moment. The counsellor must be genuine in her response if she is to respond to that sensed question, though it is not a

question that has been directly verbalised. The counsellor must make a decision. The risk is that she may end up sounding defensive or justifying something about herself.

'I would not pretend to understand, Ania, but I can hear what you tell me about it, I can appreciate something of the feelings. I was not there but I can feel it now as you tell me. But I know I cannot fully understand what it is like.'

The counsellor puts the focus on herself and not on what the client is communicating. There is no empathy to the concern expressed by the client. It is valid what Debbie has said, but is it therapeutically helpful? She could have said, 'people have to have been there, sat there, hearing the explosions, and waiting, endless waiting' which would have empathised and ended with strong focus on what Ania's statement had led up to – that sense of forever waiting.

It is not that Debbie's response was wrong, it's what would have felt appropriate for her to say in the experience of the therapeutic relationship. It can be of value, though, to consider the possibility of other responses that could have more therapeutic value, or perhaps a different therapeutic value.

'I would not want you to. For you to understand you would have had to have experienced it, and I would not want that.'

'Thank you, Ania.' Debbie lapsed into silence, unsure what to say next.

'For me, it was what you had to get used to.'

'Yes. Something that you had to get used to, there was no choice.'

'There was no choice. You did what you had to do. Life had to go on.' She stopped abruptly. Thinking of her parents whose life had not gone on, whose life had been destroyed in one explosive moment. She was not feeling so sad about it at that moment, her jaw was set. She was angry. She was angry that they were dead, killed by those bastard Serbs. She was angry that her parents were not alive to share in Maria's life. She was angry that those responsible had not been punished.

'You look angry, Ania, a lot to feel angry about.'

'I get very angry, Debbie, and then I get sad. I think about Maria, not having a grandpapa or a grandmama, and it makes me angry and sad.'

Debbie noted that it was Maria's loss, and her reaction to Maria's loss that she was describing, not her own direct loss associated with the death of her parents.

'It makes you angry and sad thinking about what Maria will not have.'

In spite of what Debbie noted, she has maintained empathy for what Ania has said. This is important. She has not directed Ania's focus away from what she is experiencing.

Yes, people do divert feelings of loss from themselves on to others. It is a way of coping, of keeping some of their own feelings contained. It is not something that the person-centred counsellor would challenge. It is how it is, how the client needs to be, and it is accepted.

This is an area where person-centred counselling may be seen to differ from other theoretical approaches that would perhaps more readily encourage the challenging of this displacement of feelings. From a person-centred perspective the client has established a way of being that works for her. To disturb it when the client is not expressing any reason or motivation to do so would be to threaten part of her psychological support system. The client is not ready for this. From a person-centred perspective it would be abusive to challenge and disturb Ania's way of being.

'She is a little girl, she should have that. It is not right that she does not.'

'Not right that Maria does not have a grandpapa or a grandmama.'

'She only has me.'

'She only has you, her mother.'

'And I only have her.'

'Yes, you only have her, it feels like you only have each other.'

'I think she will make new friends as she grows up. She will not have to know what I know. She will be free to live her own life. I hope so. That is how I want it to be.'

'Yes, that is important to you, that she does grow up and make new friends and be free to live her own life.'

'Very important. She must not have to think of the things that I have to think about.'

'You would not want her to have the thoughts that you have.'

'Or the feelings.'

'No, or the feelings.'

Ania lapsed into silence herself. She had to protect Maria. She did not have to know about the terrible things that had happened. She must be sure not to let her know. It was not right that she should have to know. But she must know to hate the Serbs. It was not easy to make sense of. She wanted Maria not to know of the terrible things, but she had to know some things, but not yet, not now, maybe later when she was older.

'Why do you do this? Why do you give your time to listen to people like me?'

The question seemed to come out of the blue, and Debbie was momentarily taken aback. It felt like it intruded in her own attempt to be with Ania, with what was on her mind as she spoke about protecting Maria.

'I want to help. I think that counselling does help. I want to offer a space and a relationship where you feel accepted and able to say what you want or be how you need to be. I want to try and help people to cope, to maybe make sense of the things that have happened to them but only if that is what the person wants. It is up to the person I am with.'

'There is no sense to the things that happened. There can be no sense. We were victims of actions that should not have happened. There is no sense to be made of it.'

'Perhaps that is partly what makes it so difficult.'

The counsellor has responded to a direct question, and the client has then picked up on part of her response. The client is responding to something that the counsellor has introduced, but it is because it has resonated with something held deeply by the client. It is, perhaps, unwittingly directive although the client was free to pick up on anything said by the therapist. However, the final response above is not empathic. It is the counsellor now trying to make sense of what is being experienced by the client. It could be argued, therefore, that the counsellor has a driving need to make sense of things and this is a supervision issue. It is not a response reflecting person-centred working. However, whether it will actually disturb or derail the flow of experiencing and expression within the client remains to be seen.

'For me, no. It is what those people do. I do not need to make sense of it, they are stupid and evil. I have to live my life, I have no need to make sense of them.'

Debbie was struck again by the forcefulness and the hatred towards those who had perpetrated the violence upon Ania and her family, and in truth she was not surprised although there seemed something incongruent about hearing Ania speak that way. Yet it was Ania and she must accept that this was as much part of Ania as was the devoted mother and the saddened daughter, and no doubt the traumatised sister as well. She must accept all aspects, all parts, of Ania. She could not, and should not, give any impression of favouring any part. They all existed – and there would be others, no doubt – all deserving of being heard, understood, and to experience the presence of the therapeutic conditions. Whilst she might conceive of them in certain terms, what was more important was how Ania would experience them, which might be quite different.

Whilst a person-centred counsellor might see a client in this way, they would not introduce it, and certainly not give them names. It may be an aid to appreciating the complexities and dynamics of the client, but that is all it can be. And it may not reflect the way the client experiences themselves.

With regard to the counsellor's sense of the client's incongruence, this is surely arising out of the counsellor's own incongruence. She is projecting expectation as to how the client will be. There is perhaps a resistance, in that moment, to accepting the client as an angry and unforgiving woman.

'You do not need to make sense of the stupid and evil people. You have to live your life.'

'I hope they burn in hell.' The words were spoken with a venomous fire.

'You want to see them burn in hell.'

'I would like to see *them*, I would like to see the terror in *their* eyes. I would like to see *them* suffer. It is what they deserve.'

'They deserve to burn and you would like to see it, see their terror, their suffering.'

Ania felt strong as she had these thoughts. They were good thoughts to have.

She believed in heaven and hell, her Christian faith was important to her. She believed God would punish them, but she wanted them to suffer on earth as well. She did not want to forgive them, they were beyond being forgiven. God would understand that. She knew God would understand that. People like that made Him angry.

'Can you understand how I feel? I don't think you can.'

'I don't think I can, but I do experience the anger in you as you speak, the desire for retribution and punishment.'

'But you do not think it is how it should be. You want me to forgive them.'

Ouch, thought Debbie, yes I do because without forgiveness the cycle of violence continues, but what to say. She couldn't hesitate, and she knew she was already hesitating.

This is a critical moment in the session and in the therapeutic relationship.

'I don't think it is easy to forgive people when they cause such pain and suffering. And it is not for me to say what people should, or should not do.' Damn thought Debbie, too many words. Be simple, be straight. Say it as it is. 'I would like to see forgiveness, but not now, not yet.'

'Thank you for your honesty. That is important to me. I do not agree with you, but I appreciate you being honest. I think you would feel different if you were me.'

'I think I probably would as well, but I do not know, and I am not you, I can only feel what I feel as me.'

'Do you accept how I feel?'

'Yes, yes I do.'

'I believe you, I see it on your face. If I did not see it there I would leave.'

The degree to which the previous critical moment was significant is revealed. Ania is picking up on Debbie's way of being, she is challenging her, checking her out. It was crucially important that Debbie was honest in her response. Her eyes would therefore reflect the truth of what she was saying. It is absolutely vital that counsellors are congruent. Yes, it may not be possible all of the time, but it should be at least most of the time – and increasingly so – and certainly in moments such as these.

'I am struck by the strength in your voice, Ania, these are very important things for you, and for me. If I could not accept what you feel, I would want to resolve that, and if I could not then you should find someone else who did accept your feelings.'

'"Resolve?"', please explain.'

'Mhmm, to sort out, make clear, find a way so that I could accept your feelings.'

'I understand.'

Debbie was still very much struck by the strength in Ania's voice. Why was she so surprised? Here was a woman who had faced traumatic loss and atrocity perpetrated on herself and her brother, and no doubt friends and her people in general, who had survived, given birth to her daughter and had come to another country, and devoted herself to caring for her and bringing her up. This was Ania the survivor speaking, Ania, proud Croatian mother who was going to survive.

'You are a strong woman, Ania, a proud Croatian mother.'

'I do not feel strong sometimes,' Ania looked down, but looked up again as she added, 'but I am proud'.

Debbie nodded as she saw the look in Ania's eyes, and the strength that whilst Ania might not be owning in this moment, she, Debbie, could see as being present. 'I am pleased to know you, Ania. I feel I have learned much about you today.'

'And I about you, Debbie.'

The session drew slowly to a close, the remainder of the session Ania talked about the family group at the centre, and asked more about what it was like. Debbie answered as best she could, and they agreed that Ania should leave the session a little early to talk to Julie about it. Then she wouldn't be delayed and risk missing the bus home as she had to be back on time for the childminder.

## Points for discussion

- Can you accept Ania's feelings – really accept them? If not, what would you do if Ania was your client?
- Critically evaluate Debbie's application of the person-centred approach in this session. Were there key person-centred responses and, if so, which and to what effect?
- How did you interpret Ania's 'stilted' responses as you were reading them? Were they a language difficulty, self-protection or something else?
- How might you have responded to Ania's statement, 'but you do not think it is how it should be. You want me to forgive them.'?
- If you were Debbie, what might you be taking to supervision from this session other than that indicated in the text. Explain your answer and what would you hope to achieve?
- Write counselling notes for this session.