

# Training Counsellors in Areas of Armed Conflict

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*This article is about the learning needs of starting counsellors in areas of armed conflict. The curricula for the training of counsellors usually are based on ideas regarding which knowledge, skills and attitudes are required for effective counselling. The curricula do not always take the personal needs and backgrounds of the participants into account. Counselling training in areas of armed conflict can only be effective if the trainer assesses these personal backgrounds and needs and adapts his training approach accordingly. Participants in training projects in areas of armed conflict often need a concise, short-term, practice-oriented training, stripped from professional jargon and connecting with their, sometimes, very modest educational level. Moreover, they need some form of support in dealing with the consequences of traumatic experiences in their own lives. The training therefore is education and group psychotherapy at the same time. In order to describe the working of such a training, we need two theoretical descriptions: one highlighting the educational side, and one highlighting the therapeutic side.*

**Keywords:** counselling training, group-therapy, learning-style, mentalizing, traumatic experiences

## The ingredients of a Western counselling training

The curricula for the training of counsellors usually are based on ideas regarding which knowledge, skills and attitudes are required for effective counselling. In general they include the following ingredients:

- *A choice of knowledge on general psychological subjects:* personality theories; developmental psychology, social psychology
- *A choice of information on the problems presented by clients and psychopathology,* including items such as problems related to substance abuse, sexual problems, depressive complaints
- *A choice of theories of counselling and psychotherapy:* including descriptions of the clinical strategies based on specific theories
- *A choice of counselling skills:* including generic skills such as: establishing contact with clients, ensuring a structured therapeutic setting, developing a therapeutic relationship, making an assessment of the client so that his problems can be understood and points of departure

for counselling become apparent, helping the client to change in one way or the other, evaluating the counselling process, and last, but not least, *monitoring oneself during the counselling sessions* (cf. Feltham & Horton, 2000). The skills aimed at helping the client to change in most training programmes not only include generic skills like the ability to provide emotional support, but also *specific techniques and interventions* inspired by particular theories on counselling and therapy.

The training courses for counsellors usually employ various teaching and training methods, such as lectures, self-study of literature, writing an essay or preparing a lecture on a specific topic related to counselling, role-play counselling, personal counselling and supervision of counselling in practice during internships.

### **Two approaches to training: subject matter-oriented versus person-oriented**

Training courses differ very much with regard to the way they join in (or miss the connection) with the personal needs and backgrounds of the future counsellors. Some courses are at first entirely focussed on transferring subject-matter (usually theoretical knowledge, with only a minimum of basic skill training). The training then has a second stage, in which the starting counsellor receives feedback over his performance as a counsellor (as registered on audio or video tape, or in a written verbatim) from a supervisor. Many counsellors who started 'supervised' practicing after such a subject-matter oriented training share

the experience that they could not use most of the theory they studied so hard during their sessions with their first client. For them practice turned out to be rather remote from the theory and the role play during the training. The meetings with the supervisors often are not experienced as very supportive.

One experienced counsellor described to me the confusion he experienced during the discussion of a audiotape of the contacts with his first clients. A small segment of the tape, which he had to choose himself, was discussed by three experienced counsellors acting as supervisors. Their discussion went over his head and almost made him abandon the training.

*Another colleague was supposed to see her clients in an institute where all rooms had video cameras; during supervision sessions one tape was chosen randomly and discussed. During her counselling sessions she had a hard time concentrating on her clients, for the cameras made her extra self-conscious.*

The last two stories concern training institutes in Canada and the U.S.A.. In areas of armed conflict luxuries as the availability of three supervisors, or counselling rooms with camera's installed are not customary. One could hardly imagine the reception of such an approach, but probably the trainees would feel very intimidated.

*A person-oriented training* departs from the assumption that a certain level of personality development is required before a participant in a training is able to integrate knowledge relevant to counselling and counselling skills in a personal repertory of helping interventions. The, for a counsellor, indispensable skill of monitoring oneself

during counselling sessions also requires a certain level of personality development. These requirements concern awareness of one's emotional states and the connected physical sensations, one's tolerance for conflicting feelings, and one's awareness of inner dialogue. Therefore, the counselling training first focuses on these personal attributes, although simultaneously theoretical subject-matter and skills may be part of the programme.

### **Practical experiences in training counsellors in areas of armed conflict**

What are the needs of starting counsellors in areas of armed conflict? The answer to that question is not easy to give. Counsellors in training may have something to say about their own needs, but most of them don't have enough understanding of what the profession of a counsellor requires and what is going on in their own minds to give a final answer. In order to find such an answer, we need at least an opinion on what is essential in counselling training and what is less essential. The opinion should be based on some kind of evidence related to the question which training procedures are effective in achieving which goals. The available evidence from practical experience during the training of counsellors in areas of armed conflict (Van der Veer, 2002a) justifies two conclusions:

1. *A concise training can be very effective, if, directly after the training, the counsellor starts to work in a structure providing regular team-supervision and occasional additional training*  
For some Western experts this may seem hard to believe. Most of them have gone

through extensive training courses themselves and therefore they are tempted to see counselling as an expert job for which years of extensive schooling and training is needed. If that were always true, psychosocial projects in areas of armed conflict, which include counselling by grass-roots counsellors after a short training would be ineffective. There is empirical evidence, however, that such projects can be effective indeed (e.g. De Jong, 2002). Counsellors can be effective even when their schooling and training is only limited, as long as they work within a supportive structure.

2. *Training is only effective when it is also an opportunity for personal growth and healing; this requires an intensive and person-oriented approach.* In this context, the following case is illustrative.

In 2001, I started to participate as an additional trainer in a training for counsellors in Sri Lanka (group A). This training had already started 15 weeks before my arrival. The programme of group A was part of a training on Saturdays and Sundays. I met the group only on Saturdays, other trainers took care of the programme on Sunday.

During the training of group A, I used a person-oriented approach. A few weeks before, the same approach had been used with two other groups (B and C). The participants of all three groups had the same ethnic and cultural background, as well as similar experiences with armed conflict, displacement and living under all kinds of restrictions.

The aforementioned approach is focussed on creating opportunities for personal growth for the participants by encouraging them to discuss their own experiences with problems and receiving

help. The idea behind this approach is that a certain level of personal development is a condition for the assimilation of knowledge and skills related to counselling. The programme also offers an introduction to theoretical knowledge and exercises for developing counselling skills, but they are of secondary importance.

The programme of group B had lasted 6 days from 9.00 to 4.00, spread over two weeks. The programme of group C had lasted two entire weeks and had taken place in a residential setting.

In both groups B and C, the participants had been very active during group discussions and quite open about personal problems and traumatic experiences.

During the first meetings with group A, however, the participants seemed to be reluctant to take part in a dialogue with the trainer. The atmosphere in the group felt unsafe and passive-resistant. The techniques that usually help to break the ice in such groups did not have sufficient effect. Nevertheless the trust of the participants in the trainer seemed not to be the issue, as two participants started to come for individual counselling after the fourth day of training. It lasted five sessions before the trainer thought that the participants now felt safe enough to take part in a group discussion about personal matters. He started a discussion of the atmosphere in the group. That cleared the air.

The unsafe atmosphere in group A becomes more understandable if one knows more details about the subject-matter oriented training approach of the project in which my person-oriented approach suddenly was inserted. The

approach of group A was, before my arrival, entirely based on a Western style academic programme. It focussed on transferring theoretical knowledge. Skill training was hardly programmed, and personal growth and coping with own traumatic experiences was not at all a part of the deal. Moreover, the whole setting was rather impersonal. For both groups B and C, one person with a certain charisma assumed responsibility for the training of the counsellors and the project in which they were going to work for a longer period. (S)he was present at all sessions presented by me as a guest-trainer. In group A, there was no such leadership. The participants were confronted with 16 different trainers, and the communication between these trainers was left to chance. Most of them used lecturing as their main educational method. Thus the training had become fragmented, it induced passivity, and did not provide any organized form of personal support and guidance of the participants. When I arrived, the training had been going on like this for 15 weekends. I started with a different approach that did not fit at all the usual routine but the exposure to this approach was much less intensive than with group B and C.

During my sessions with group A, I was able to get an impression of what had remained of the theoretical knowledge they had been taught before my arrival, for example on personality theories and developmental psychology. It turned out that the participants could reproduce only some theoretical terms but were unable to connect these terms with their own experiential world. Many other concepts had been forgotten.

### **Training good enough counselors in areas of armed conflict: points of departure**

A training of counsellors should work on at least three levels: the level of personal growth, the level of skills, and the level of insight.

*The level of personal growth.* Counselling requires certain personality characteristics. As a person, the counsellor needs to make sure that his own problems (for example: problems related to a laborious bereavement process after the death of a family member due to the armed conflict) do not interfere with the counselling. Therefore, he needs to be able and willing to register and cope with unpleasant emotional states that may arise during counselling. He also needs an ability for mentalizing: for thinking about his own and other people's inner mental processes. The development of these personal skills requires an ongoing process of personal growth. This process is started during training, but must continue through supervision and, if necessary, there must be counselling for personal problems. During the training, this process can start by challenging the participants to discuss personal feelings and problems in the group, and by doing exercises that promote body-awareness, such as breathing exercises and relaxation exercises.

*The level of helping skills.* Counselling requires minimally the conscious use of already existing social skills in cooperation with and helping other people. This conscious use requires a simple conceptual framework describing these 'counselling skills'.

*The level of knowledge and insight.* Counselling requires basic theoretical knowledge that is helpful in analysing personal problems of clients, and in observing patterns in complaints, symptoms, individual behaviour, family interactions and so on. Counsellors in an area of armed conflict also need a very basic knowledge of those psychiatric symptoms that indicate serious pathology for which counselling is not a sufficient answer.

In summary, training counsellors in areas of armed conflict is at the same time a form of group therapy for members of a traumatised community integrated with a structured piece of education.

In order to explain the working of the training, we need two types of theory:

1. A theory on trauma and group-therapy
2. A theory on educating people in areas of armed conflict

### **A theory on trauma and group therapy**

The training-as-group-therapy is based on a theory that describes the psychological consequences of armed conflict in mentally relatively healthy people as recurring unpleasant emotional states, hardly adequate or inadequate coping with these emotional states, limited headway in making sense of traumatic experiences during the armed conflict, and inhibition of mentalizing causing some conflicts, communication problems and loneliness. Each of these consequences can be addressed during the training-as-group-therapy.

*Recurrent unpleasant emotional states.* As a result of various psychological processes, the unbearable emotional states related to traumatic experiences due to armed conflict are often relived. They are however not recognised by the person involved as temporary mental states, related to the past. Instead, they are felt as real experiences, occurring here and now, about which he is helpless.

*Inadequate coping.* The individual develops ways of coping with the intrusion of these unpleasant states. The coping is aimed at avoiding awareness of painful mental states, but inevitably results in a diminishing of awareness of one's own mental states in general. That is a negative side effect: pleasant mental states can no longer be enjoyed; and the capacity for empathizing with other people and mentalizing becomes diminished. The behaviour of the traumatized individual is in general more often based on impulsive reactions than on mindful slowing down and reflecting on what is happening to him.<sup>2</sup>

*Limited headway in making sense of the traumatic experiences.* The avoidance of unpleasant mental states results in absence of processing of what happened during the traumatic events. The first interpretation of the events is often a self-defeating one, and this self-defeating interpretation is not challenged and turned in an interpretation that allows a more positive view on the future.

*Inadequate mentalizing.* Mentalizing or 'mind-reading' is the capacity for apprehending one's own behaviour and the behaviour of other people as the result of mental states such as thoughts, feelings, intentions and beliefs. Mentalizing, interpreting what is on the

mind of other people, is an indispensable skill for survival as a social being. It is an interpretive skill human beings use constantly, often without being aware of it (Allen, 2001). Mentalizing is at the base of understanding other people and predicting their behaviour.

A traumatic experience caused by other human beings is essentially an event that shatters the self-evident, basic assumptions underlying a person's mentalizing. This results in an inhibition of conscious mentalizing. If mentalizing, aware or unaware, does take place, it is often based on the assumption that people cannot be trusted, generally have evil intentions and so on.

Such a style of mentalizing inevitably results in a lack of communication and conflicts with other people, the feeling that other people have hostile intentions, a feeling that the world is a totally unsafe place, and an increased feeling of loneliness.

*Recurrent unpleasant emotional states and the training-as-group-therapy.* The training-as-group-therapy is aimed at providing a climate of security in which mentalizing becomes possible and unpleasant emotional states can be contained. Therefore, the training of counsellors in areas of armed conflict is aimed at developing adequate mentalizing and restoring the participants' awareness of emotional states. That requires a climate of security in which the participants experience a relationship built on mutual trust with the trainer and other participants. This climate of security will develop when the trainer-therapist's first aim is to make personal contact with the participants, and when he shows real interest in what is on their minds. The

trainer-therapist has to be respectful, authentic in his good intentions and able to show empathy. He also has to offer a predictable, safe structure, in the form of clear assignments for the participants. In addition, he has to put clear limits to the behaviour of participants, in the sense that he prevents or stops hostile behaviour from one participant to another. Through exercises and questions he gently challenges the participants into experiencing their own mental states more often and on a deeper level than they are used to. Exercises aimed at awareness of body-sensations can be alternated with exercises aimed at awareness of one's own mental state.

*Inadequate coping and the training-as-a-group-therapy.* In addition, the trainer-therapist offers skills for dealing with one's own unpleasant emotional states before they become unbearable, through exercises aimed at body-awareness and relaxation; and by making the participants experience that talking about unpleasant emotional states with a sympathetic listener brings relief.

In order to make the own unpleasant mental states more understandable, the trainer-therapist offers simple frameworks of theoretical concepts describing the psychological consequences of traumatisation. These bits of theory are systematically discussed in relation to the own experiences of the participants. This helps them to see unpleasant mental states for what they are (temporary inner mental states related to the past instead of experiences in the outside world here and now). This leads to searching for alternative ways of coping, and subsequently to changes in their coping behaviour.

*Making sense of traumatic experiences as a part of the training-as-a-group-therapy.* During the training, participants often discuss their own traumatic experiences, reliving the emotions attached to these experiences. That is allowed, but the training is not aimed at raking up emotions. The main reason for discussing traumatic experiences is to help the participants to make sense of these experiences. This usually means that they have to reframe what happened, and to re-evaluate their view of themselves and the world.

The theoretical framework describing the consequences of traumatisation mentioned in the previous paragraph can function as a tool in this process of reframing.

*Inadequate mentalizing and the training-as-a-group-therapy.* The trainer-therapist can also stimulate the participants to think more about what is going on in the mind of others. Stereotyped negative views on the intentions of other people are, in a respectful and empathic way, challenged. The background of these stereotyped negative assumptions – often a mixture of own traumatic experiences and traditional cultural beliefs – are also discussed.

### **A theory on educating people in area's of armed conflict.**

A training for people in areas of armed conflict has to deal with conditions for learning that are not exactly favourable, with difficulties related to the learning styles of the participants, and with emotional barriers for learning in the participants.

*Unfavourable conditions and how the trainer can deal with them.* In areas of armed conflict, community life is disturbed, and

mutual trust has been shattered. Therefore the emotional climate in general manifests suspicion; gossip is more frequent than direct and straight-forward communication, and rumours are taken as seriously or more seriously than facts.

During a training in a conflict area in South East Asia, the atmosphere in the group seemed tense. After two days, the trainer found out that a few weeks before the subsidy for the counselling project that employed the participants had been lowered. The participants had heard this from a person in the office, they had not been informed officially. They believed that as a result of the cutback in expenditure some of them would be made redundant. In the group, the rumour went around that their behaviour during the training could determine whether they would keep or lose their job. Some of the participants thought that one female participant was close to the wife of the project coordinator, and that she would give information about the group meetings to this lady who would undoubtedly pass it on to the project coordinator. The only element of truth here was a cutback in the budget for transport.

Such an emotional climate influences the behaviour of the participant. The trainer must be aware of this. His approach must be transparent and he should be very precise in his communications. He should also be prepared for negative interpretations of good intentions, and always ready to correct misunderstandings.

*Difficulties related to the learning styles of the participants.* In areas of armed conflict in underdeveloped countries, education is often given in an authoritarian way. The

students are expected to reproduce the subject matter they are offered, and independent thinking about the subject matter is either ignored or discouraged. This results in a *learning style oriented at reproduction*. The participant has a passive, receptive attitude; he tries to memorize subject matter without transforming it or connecting it to other subject matter or his own daily life.

*When the trainer entered, the participants stood up. When the trainer was seated, they sat down, pen and exercise books ready. During the introduction-round the participants were asked to tell something about themselves. All of them mentioned their name, preceded by Mister, Miss or Missis, their diplomas, and their marital status – nothing else. When the trainer tried to engage the participants into a dialogue, his tentative questions were met by silence. A bit of probing produced one whispered answer. That day the trainer asked the participants to make an overview of the problems of the refugees they would start to counsel when their training was finished. They did that with a lot of enthusiasm, producing long lists of problems. Then they were asked to form small groups, and then to discuss which of these problems were very familiar because they themselves or people very close to them had been affected by these problems. In addition, they could discuss what kind of help they had received and whether this help was adequate or not. The next day, the trainer started with dividing the participants over small groups, and each group was asked to discuss what they had learned from yesterday's programme. After half an hour, the groups were asked to exchange in the full group what they had talked about. It turned out that each group had appointed a representative. Each of these representatives produced a list of problems frequently encountered in refugee camps. None of them came with a more personal view on yesterday's programme.*

The trainer has to use methods that create opportunities for independent thinking and discussion, instead of offering knowledge as if it were a ready made meal. A gently challenging, activating style of training that makes the participants take an active role, can help them to develop their creativity and their skills in actively collecting and processing knowledge. Such a style offers the participants a chance to develop their self-confidence.

The trainer can also offer help with the process of connecting theoretical knowledge with own life experience and professional practice.

A trainer may also meet participants that have hardly had any education and who show a *chaotic, undirected style of learning*. These participants may be eager to learn and they may have a lot of practical wisdom and a good intuition but they have much difficulty in making summaries and distinguishing between major and minor points of the subject matter offered during the training.

*During a training of already experienced community workers, the participants wanted to discuss problematic behaviour of children in a playground project. One participant told a story of a boy of 14 with 'difficult' behaviour. She was frequently interrupted by another participant who worked in the same playground. The trainer first tried to get a picture of the problem behaviour, but it was very difficult to get the participants to describe what they had actually observed during the last two playground sessions. Their story was a mix of emotional utterances (anger, indignation), bits of information about the boy's background, stories of problem behaviour of the same boy months ago, opinions on how boys of his age should be in general (obedient, helpful to adults) and so on. Getting a description of the behaviour considered to be disturbing took 30 minutes. The*

*problem behaviour was: 1. Keeping his eyes open and making funny faces during the meditation (why make children meditate in a playground?) 2. Hitting another boy during a duel in a soccer game 3. Throwing a stone in a hornet's nest after he had been scolded for hitting this other boy.*

With regard to personal feelings and practical experience, people with this learning style have difficulty in articulating the problems they encounter. In order to accommodate people with this learning style, the trainer has to offer guidance by being very well structured on the one hand, and allowing for emotional expression at the other hand.

Much less frequently a trainer may encounter participants with a *learning style oriented towards rational thinking*. These, often somewhat better educated participants, try to find connections between different parts of the subject matter they are offered. They try to bring everything together in one coherent system that provides an overview. Participants with this style often find it difficult to link their abstract ideas to practice with real people and to reflect on their personal feelings.

*Raja's behaviour was exceptional in the sense that he asked questions. These questions, however, were always very abstract, for example about the relationship between the emotions of people and their self-confidence. The trainer tried to make the matter a bit more personal and asked Raja if he felt self-confident in all situations, or if there were situations in which he felt less confident. Raja looked puzzled. Do you feel confident right now, the trainer said, trying to help. 'Normal', said Raja.*

The trainer may try to help participants with this learning style in becoming more tolerant for confusing and contradictory feelings.

In experienced helpers, the trainer may encounter a *practice-oriented learning style*. These participants try to link new knowledge to what they know already from experience. They connect theoretical concepts offered by the trainer to examples from daily life and translate theoretic ideas on counselling into plans for action in practice. They start to use theoretical frameworks for describing their practical experience and inner processes without ignoring their feelings. Participants with this style may need some emotional support from the trainer when a new piece of knowledge confronts them unexpectedly with a hitherto unknown part of themselves.

*Selvam was a very active student, who always asked questions related to clients he had seen. He took part in a deep relaxation exercise. While participants around him dozed off happily, he became more tense and moved into a sitting position with his eyes open. Afterwards he told the trainer that he became aware of feeling very angry, not understanding why.*

*Emotional barriers for learning:* Training can only be effective when emotional barriers for learning in the participants are removed. The following emotional barriers can be encountered:

1. Avoidance of speaking or acting in the group in general (caused by fear of making mistakes and receiving negative feedback). The trainer can help to remove this barrier by being a model for supportive feedback, and by discussing negative feedback both in theoretical terms and in relation to the personal experiences of himself and the participants.
2. Avoidance of experiencing unpleasant emotional states (possibly caused by traumatic experience in the past). The

trainer can help to remove this barrier by discussing this matter both in theoretical terms and in relation to the personal experiences of himself and the participants.

### **The trainer-therapist as role-model**

During the training, the trainers is a role-model for good-enough counsellors, showing a benevolent, caring attitude with openness to learn from the experiences of the participants, and also some openness about his personal history and his feelings here and now. The trainer should not entertain an attitude that results in keeping distance or making the participants feel that their teacher is much more knowledgeable than they will ever be.

The attitude of the trainer helps the participants to develop a similar attitude, an egalitarian attitude including interest in what is going on in the mind of other people, mindful consideration of own mental states, unconditional respect and authenticity when dealing with people who need help, and an openness to learn from new experiences instead of indiscriminately following existing rules or opinions.

A training aimed at working in practice will be much more effective if what is learned can be tried out in practice immediately, and thus integrated in the participant's existing repertory of social (and analytical) skills for helping other people. Therefore, during the counselling training the participants should start to see a client as early as possible, under supervision by an experienced counsellor trained as a supervisor. Preferably a supervisor who has an open eye for the

personal needs and backgrounds of these starting counsellors and a caring, supportive, encouraging attitude.

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<sup>1</sup> The participants in counselling training courses in areas of armed conflict usually do not suffer from trauma-related complaints and symptoms in a incapacitating way. But their psychological functioning often is not optimal.

<sup>2</sup> Many of the coping strategies used by the individual have additional negative side effects. A very clear example is the use of alcohol or other drugs to get out of a painful emotional state. Other examples are withdrawal from social contacts and aggressive or destructive behaviour. However these coping strategies are infrequent in participants in training courses for counsellors. Some participants told the author that they had such problems in the past, and that, after receiving help with these problems, they decided to take part in a counselling training.

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