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Volume 24  
Issue 9  
November 2013

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Category: *Cover feature*

*Student counsellors Orville Hall and Jill Swindells spent over a year on placement at a category C male prison. It was for both a deeply challenging and rewarding experience. 'First day, sat in the car, looked at the high walls and razor wire for a long time before going in... my head said yes, my body seemed naturally to want to go the other way,' admits Hall. 'I came to see the counselling relationship as one of the safest inside the prison, and one that was much valued by our clients,' writes Swindell. The article outlines the constraints imposed by the prison regime, the personal demands on the counsellor of working in such an environment, managing the dichotomy between custody and care, and the importance of a supportive team and expert supervision.*

## • Inside out: two views of a prison placement

- by
- Jill Swindells
- Orville Hall

Early in the second year of our person-centred counselling foundation degree, the placement coordinator told us about a one-day-a-week placement in a nearby category C male prison. The prison was offering supervision and travel expenses, within a 20-mile radius, to final year students. The university suggested it was suitable for those with over 50 hours of supervised counselling hours. Only the few with relevant experience applied.

**Jill Swindells:** Having worked with victims who were also ex-offenders, I already had a foot on either side of the high wire fence, metaphorically speaking. Many offenders strike me as 'victims of circumstances', adding another dimension to the nature vs nurture debate. I believe that whatever the offender may have done does not define them, and nor should it affect their entitlement to help and support of any kind, such as counselling.

**Orville Hall:** My first thought was, 'This sounds really interesting, I will apply, yet... have I got what it takes?' I had worked in some challenging areas with clients that many would like to forget exist in society. As my father used to say to me: 'You don't miss a problem.' I feel these people are important. Working at the prison meant I might be working with people like me, from a similar tough urban ghetto background... maybe my culture, history and experience could be useful to clients in this unique environment. Being black and poor in 1960s Britain, surrounded by racist skinheads, meant I had to grow up fast to survive. I was very lucky and had a stable, loving family who encouraged me to do my best. Most of my friends at that time did not have the same; they drifted off the legal path.

Some clients have said to me: 'How can a prim and proper middle-class, white counsellor understand my world? They try but... no chance really!' I remember my mother always saying, 'Those who feel it, know it.' I have faith in the 'person-centred' way: if the core conditions are offered and, most importantly, accepted by the client, a therapeutic relationship is possible.

### **Selection process**

The selection process involved an informal visit, followed by a formal interview with the clinical supervisor and line manager and a high-level security check. Comprehensive prison induction and training courses, over a three-month period, gave both parties the time and opportunity to assess our suitability for the placement. At the final meeting, we signed the four-way (placement agency, clinical supervisor, university placement coordinator and student) university placement agreement, the prison contract and the Official Secrets Act.

**JS:** I wondered if I might come across as too 'white, middle class and cerebral' and that, inside, I might be perceived as more police/magistrate/probation than counsellor/psychotherapist. To my knowledge, only a couple of clients struggled with transference issues to the extent that it prevented us working together. The majority seemed to value our differences, appreciate that 'someone like me' (however I was perceived) cared enough and valued 'someone like them' (however they perceived themselves) and were genuinely surprised to discover our role was unpaid, which appeared to add value to our work and subsequently how they valued themselves. Following induction and training, I felt well prepared and confident of strong support from an experienced supervisor with significant prison experience. However, I remained apprehensive about using my full name.

**OH:** I remember thinking: 'Is this a good idea?' Why put myself in such a challenging place? Some people in prison may really need to be there; would I really be safe? Or, more importantly, would I feel safe? Is it possible to achieve good client work if you have one eye on the escape door during sessions? The clinical supervisor was honest and transparent about working in the prison, so I started to feel more confident.

### **Commitment**

As agreed, we committed to a full day (8am–5pm) every week for a year, initially attending weekly supervision, ongoing monthly prison training, occasional proficiency tests on IT and data protection, being an active part of the counselling team, managing our own caseloads, liaising with other departments, occasionally adopting an advocacy role when necessary, promoting the service internally and accompanying clients to and from counselling sessions – and all the while complying fully with the extensive safety and security policies and procedures.

**JS:** For me, this was a huge commitment on top of two other counselling placements and unpredictable freelance research work. However, it was a unique opportunity to complement both,

which I could not refuse. Operational guidelines, intensive clinical supervision and line management helped provide the answers. I came to see the counselling relationship as one of the safest inside the prison, and one that was much valued by our clients, as demonstrated in verbal and written feedback, tangible relaxation behind the closed door, and some who returned for a second block of sessions.

**OH:** First day, sat in the car, I looked at the high walls and razor wire for a long time before going in... My head said yes, my body seemed naturally to want to go the other way. It really helped having such fantastic support from the rest of the counselling team and my supervisor. Honesty and transparency with my supervisor ensured that we could discuss all aspects of my work.

### **Protocols and presenting issues**

To uphold autonomy, clients ideally self-refer. However, prison staff can refer clients, with their express permission. Counselling is never provided just because it is required by a sentence plan or to obtain a good report for parole boards or category hearings. Absolutely no reports are provided. Evidence of attendance is simply a signed off appointment card and, hopefully, a sense of satisfaction in making progress towards achieving their aims or helping to resolve whatever brought them to counselling – loss, guilt, shame, fear, change, relationships, abuse etc – all the usual issues brought to counselling in other settings, although the history or context may be different. For example, a client's fear may be about coping with or leaving prison.

**JS:** Counselling seems to be one of the few things over which prisoners have some freedom of choice: whether to refer, contract or attend, identifying aims and directing each session's content, unlike other prison-based interventions. To me, the person-centred counselling approach feels ideally suited to this setting and, in part, helps redress prisoners' general lack of autonomy and control. And, while I hold the keys, symbolic of power, the rules are not mine but imposed on me also.

**OH:** Self-referrals are common for me, which is encouraging. Many potential clients now stop me on the corridors: 'What do you do here, mate?' (Black man walking round with keys – not in uniform too!) This is my opportunity to explain what person-centred counselling is. 'You don't have to be mad to benefit from it. It's non-directive. It's about you and whatever you want to talk about.'

### **Confidentiality and safety**

Following initial safety and security vetting, a qualified counsellor conducts a full 'risk and needs assessment', which includes clients' suitability for counselling and/or other interventions. To ensure safe and ethical counselling practice, the level of counsellor experience/competency required is also given careful consideration. Once clients are allocated, the counsellor has access to a potential client's initial counselling assessment and their prison and probation records to gauge whether they feel able to work with them. If so, they meet to carry out their assessment and start their case formulation.

Shadowing some initial assessments provided valuable opportunities to find our way around and familiarise ourselves with the counselling rooms and how to manage the time and space in this new environment. The counselling rooms provide a haven of peace and privacy.

**JS:** For both client and counsellor confidentiality and safety, it was important to me that clients were unlikely to be released to my local area, although this could never be guaranteed. To emphasise clients' autonomy, I took great care to clarify that our first meeting was a joint assessment of each other, not mine of them, which seems to be the automatic assumption, particularly in this setting. In my view, theirs is of equal value and significance.

**OH:** Client assessments are carried out using all my senses, keeping attention on their 'non-verbal' communication. I keep focus on my 'feelings' (positive or negative) being generated by the client. All aspects together assist me to make as accurate an assessment as possible.

### **Time and other limits**

Clients are offered a block of eight one-hour sessions, with the option of an extra two sessions and/or they can return to the waiting list for a further block. Priority is given to clients' medical appointments, accredited courses etc, and the prison's operational requirements always take precedence for safety/security reasons, so appointments are often postponed and occasionally unexpectedly terminated due to transfers or opting out. It's rare to see a full day's schedule of four clients.

**JS:** It was my first experience of time-limited counselling, which initially tested my person-centred training and values. I felt surprisingly tempted to set the pace to optimise time and achieve clients' aims within eight sessions or before being moved on. Thankfully, clinical supervision quickly came to the rescue. In this setting, I had not expected so many DNAs (did not attend), cancelled or missed sessions. While these hindered the accumulation of the 150 counselling hours required for qualification, they afforded me plenty of time to keep up to date with administration, client notes, inter-department liaison, prison policy, procedures and critical news updates.

**OH:** Many clients have been abused during childhood, many have self-harmed, past events have had a major impact on their adult lives; yet many wish to move on from their history to the 'here and now' and the best possible future. I have learnt so much from them, the most important lesson being that all are individuals and the true experts on their world. Clients do transfer before the end of planned sessions. With no control over the prison system, I hope that they can obtain counselling at their next location if required.

**JS:** It seems the whole prison community knows who is having counselling – yet another thing for clients to deal with. Between visits I noticed myself thinking about my prison clients more than those in other settings; reflecting on how I might feel in their shoes and wondering what was going on for them, particularly those who were struggling to cope with prison life or worrying about home. As I got on with my life outside, theirs inside felt 'on hold' to me; yet for some it seemed to be their whole life, with no place outside to call home.

**OH:** Some clients deal with prison life better than others. Counselling sessions can be the only place where they can safely be themselves in a non-judgmental environment. I always remember to ensure that clients put their 'safety shield' back on before going back into the tough world outside the counselling room. Emotional outlay can be seen as a 'weakness' on the prison wings.

### **Monitoring outcomes**

The counselling service is monitored anonymously, using CORE, in the first and last sessions, along with a final feedback questionnaire. Neither is compulsory. The overall results are published internally in a comprehensive annual report. It helps inform future service development and provides firm evidence of the need for and the value of the service.

**JS:** I had not used anything like CORE before and initially felt reluctant to do so. However, I soon found a way to incorporate it into my person-centred way of working so it would benefit the client by facilitating deeper reflection and discussion. Before filling it in, I invited clients to seek clarification on anything they were unsure about. Unsurprisingly, two CORE questions frequently arose: 19, feeling affection for others and 30, self-blame. Following completion, I explore what if anything has come up for the client as a consequence of the task. Finally, I offer the opportunity to compare their first and last CORE scores to highlight any changes.

**OH:** The CORE form was new to me. Most clients seem to stop and think about their answers, assisting them to focus on their feelings and behaviour. It also gives a 'before and after' indication of the effectiveness of the counselling. I am encouraged by the feedback from my clients. They welcome the opportunity to talk to someone who really listens and is non-judgmental and transparent when discussing their world. In many cases this can be a new experience, maybe the start of a new self-awareness that could lead to possible non-reoffending.

### **Looking back...**

**JS:** I left with a heavy heart, particularly for those who had signed up for a second block of counselling. Following this placement, I have taken on voluntary counselling roles in schools (perhaps helping prevent future incarceration for those at risk), I seek more frequent client feedback, I value my supervisor's directly relevant experience, I have developed more creative approaches to self-care and I place much greater value on my personal autonomy.

The experience was invaluable for my counselling practice in other settings (eg pre-trial therapy ) and has helped broaden my social research (eg evaluating an 'alcohol treatment requirement' programme for offending service users in the community). Following graduation and a nine-month break, the opportunity to go back on a voluntary basis emerged and I hope to return shortly. Pursuing a prison

counsellor role currently feels a step too far for me unless it is part time; otherwise it would lack the balance and diversity I seek in both life and work.

**OH:** My cultural and poor urban economic background has greatly assisted me in understanding many of my prison clients' worlds. Working with a diverse cultural client group has improved my personal learning, counselling practice and personal development. The importance of quality supervision, backed by good managerial support, is clear to me. I valued working with a unique and highly experienced person as my supervisor at the prison. She ensured a good understanding of the ethics and guidelines required to work safely with such a challenging client group. The future looks interesting. After nearly two years volunteering in the prison, I feel relaxed as a counsellor within this environment. The effect on self and my practice has been positive as I feel free to be myself with the clients.

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*Jill Swindells is a freelance qualitative social and market researcher specialising in sensitive issues, the vulnerable and hard to reach. She has volunteered with Victim Support for 10 years and completed two other placements during counselling training, at a hospice and with a sexual abuse agency.*

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*Orville Hall is employed by the community services team in the Probation Service, working directly with people given community payback court orders. He has experience of working with poor young people in urban settings, including Harlem, New York. He is a past member of the Youth Justice Team and also has experience of working in a drugs/alcohol addiction agency.*

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