# Co-counselling International Today

John Talbut

A significant event in the origins of Co-counselling International (CCI) was the publication in *Self & Society* in May 1974 of an open letter from John Heron to Harvey Jackins. The disagreements spelled out in this letter caused John to break away from the Re-evaluation Counselling communities (RC) founded by Harvey. At about the same time a co-counselling community in Connecticut established by Dency and Tom Sargent also separated from RC. John and the Sargents then set up CCI, with the first CCI workshop taking place in Massachusetts in April 1975.

What has happened in the 22 years since then? In this article I aim to answer this question by describing some of the features of CCI as it is today. I stress that this is personal view based on my experience of active involvement in UK and international CCI activities.

## What is co-counselling?

Many, perhaps most, readers of *Self & Society* will be familiar with co-counselling, probably through having attended at least a basic training course. On the other hand I have often heard people saying that they co-counselled together when clearly that was not what they are doing. Co-counselling is a disciplined activity. Two people sharing time in a relatively informal way, though they may benefit greatly from this, are unlikely to achieve what they could from working within the rules and procedures of a co-counselling session.

Co-counselling is reciprocal, peer counselling. It is reciprocal in that participants take it in turn to be client and counsellor. One of the disciplines is that each person takes the same time as the client (co-counselling can be done in groups as well as in pairs, in which case more time is spent in the counsellor role).

The peerness comes partly from the reciprocity. However, co-counselling

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takes this further in that it is not the counsellor's role to be the expert who can help the client with their process. The counsellor's role is principally to be a supportive presence. In CCI this is taken to the point where it is actually the client who is fully in charge of the session. The client chooses the level of intervention which the counsellor may use and this can be just to give full supportive attention, without saying or doing anything more. Even at its most intensive, in co-counselling the counsellor is essentially restricted to reminding the client about techniques that they might use. Counsellors are not permitted to offer anything by way of interpretation, analysis or advice.

## *Basic training*

One of the main requirements for becoming a co-counsellor is to undertake a 40-hour training course in the fundamentals of co-counselling. In RC, entry to these courses tends to be by invitation and they tend to be run in people's homes. CCI is more open and courses are generally publicly advertised. They take place in a number of formats: evening classes, weekend classes, residential weeks. Most are run privately, but usually in public premises. An increasing number are being run in educational establishments and attract state funding, including several under the auspices of the Open College Network.

## *Balance of attention*

Co-counselling takes the client-centred idea to its obvious conclusion. If it is indeed the case, and it certainly seems to be, that given the support and space to do so people will self-actualise and sort themselves out, then why do we need experts to help them? Why not trust them each to be their own expert?

What this means in fact is that each client is their own counsellor. This means that in a co-counselling session the client's attention has to be balanced between being fully in touch with the material they are working on, for example doing some powerfully cathartic regression work, and at the same time being aware of where they are, what they are doing, what techniques they can use, how the time is going and how to avoid damage.

This skill of maintaining a balance of attention is fundamental to co-counselling. When well developed, this ability to be in the thick of things, perhaps to be feeling quite emotional but simultaneously to have attention for the process, can be very useful in life generally.

## *A definition of CCI*

Some years ago I saw a need for a clear statement of what it meant to be a member of CCI. Although there was quite a lot of written material about the organisation, including several manuals, what I was looking for and started to develop was a concise, necessary and sufficient statement of the significance of membership. My work on this formed a basis for John Heron's *A Definition of CCI* which was published in 1994. This is not an 'official' document and CCI has no mechanism for making it one. It aims to set out what we, as members, hold in common. The status of the definition lies in its being widely accepted as an accurate statement of what we are.

CCI is not a membership organisation in the sense of having subscriptions, membership lists or set procedures for inclusion or exclusion. Anyone who falls within the terms of the definition can be considered to

be a member. The responsibility for deciding whether or not this is so rests primarily with the person themselves and thereafter with any other member of CCI for whom it becomes an issue. This raises some interesting issues and disputes, since the fact that someone is excluded from membership of one particular group of co-counsellors, such as a local organisation, does not necessarily mean that they are excluded from CCI.

## *Organisation*

CCI is, then, an association of groups and individuals who come within what it means to be a member of CCI. That is it. It has no constitution, no fixed structure, no appointed officers. What really excites me about CCI is that we have shown that we can not only survive but develop for over 20 years (and are still going strong) without the need for all the conventional trappings of organisation. We have shown that an association of people who are sufficiently self-directed (and that is what we get from co-counselling) can organise without the need for fixed rules and structures. There *is* plenty of organisational structure within CCI, but this is dynamic and evolving, with constant changes of people involved. It works simply on the basis of individual co-counsellors accepting that if they want something to happen it is their responsibility to do something to make it happen.

And what does happen? In the UK we organise two national residential weekend gatherings every year. We have a national newsletter, several local newsletters and an Internet web site. Basic training courses are offered throughout the country. We have training courses and workshops for teachers of co-counselling. There are local associations in various parts of the country and all sorts of local and regional workshops and activities. In Europe we have a regular annual one-week residential gathering that currently rotates between four countries. Internationally CCI is well established in the Netherlands, New Zealand, around Connecticut in the USA and in the UK. There are also active groups in Belgium, Germany, Hungary and Ireland.

There is a rich diversity of local organisation. Some local associations, notably in London, the Netherlands, Scotland and the USA do in fact have constitutions, rules and structures. Elsewhere the structure is looser, with fully ad hoc organisation being the practice in many areas. Internationally and overall in the UK there is no fixed structure and organisation is ad hoc.

It is impossible to say how many people are involved in co-counselling. Probably the number of people who have done the basic training and could be counted as co-counsellors runs into tens of thousands in the UK alone. I know of a few hundred activists throughout the UK and each of these probably represents more than ten people actively co-counselling. National residential workshops regularly attract some 80 to 120 participants.

While this article tends to emphasise group activities it remains the case that the core of co-counselling is in the individual two-way sessions which co-counsellors arrange between themselves. Many co-counsellors keep up their regular sessions without getting involved in any other co-counselling activities.

## *Counter culture*

CCI is, I believe uniquely, counter-cultural in two important ways. Firstly it values and encourages catharsis, and secondly it

is based on self-direction — co-counsellors are in charge of their own therapy. In a society that is so anti-cathartic, and where dependency is such a feature of life, these are powerful contradictions. CCI deals effectively with two factors that undermine a lot of therapy: an unwillingness to work with emotions, and the failure to deal with power issues between therapist and client. The upshot if this is that co-counselling can be very effective therapy, enabling people to make deep and rapid changes. It is consistently empowering and it is probably the best training there is for emotional competence.

Like any therapy, though, co-counselling has its limitations. What it cannot do is to help someone who is unable to be sufficiently self-directed. Similarly it cannot meet the needs of someone for more directive therapy, for example to push them through some block. What many co-counsellors do, self-directedly, if they need more of a push is to embark on some other therapy as well. The combination of going to a therapist and doing co-counselling can often have a valuable synergy.

## *Children*

Co-counsellors in the UK have been leading the way in involving children in co-counselling. This has partly been for the benefit of the children, directly from the experience of having the sort of support and attention that co-counsellors can give and indirectly by helping their parents to give them better support. It has also been for the benefit of other adults, since there is nothing like the presence of children to get us in touch with our own childhood issues.

The involvement of children has come in three ways. One was a style of residential workshop in which Susan Ford was a pioneer. In these workshops the aim was to have three adults for every child. At any time one third of the adults in turn would be with the children, essentially playing, but bringing their knowledge and awareness from co-counselling to enhance the activities. One third of the adults would be working on their own personal development, having co-counselling sessions or doing whatever else seemed helpful. The final third would be involved in housekeeping.

The second way of bringing children in is to allow them to be present at some other co-counselling gatherings. This is partly done to enable some co-counsellors to come who otherwise would be unable to do so because of childcare responsibilities. Equally, though, it is to give the children the opportunity to experience the highly supportive and accepting culture that usually exists when co-counsellors come together. We have learned about the need to set boundaries so that children can be children while co-counsellors who want to get on with their own work can have unintruded space to do so.

Thirdly there is no age limit in co-counselling. Anyone who is able to do it — and often what this comes down to is being able to give good attention as counsellor — can attend a training course and become a co-counsellor. People as young as 12 have done this.

## *The psychological basis of co-counselling*

The original theory of co-counselling is based on the idea that behaviour patterns are driven by feelings that result from the

failure to discharge emotions caused by earlier distressing events. Events in the present re-stimulate the feelings associated with past events. Co-counselling practice focuses on getting in touch with the emotions associated with whatever issue the client wants to work on. The aim is then to get into catharsis ('aim for discharge'), via the catharsis to regress to the original distressing event and then to discharge the undischarged emotion associated with that event. When this works there follows some shift of consciousness or new insight ('reevaluation') and the client ends up feeling more in control in the situation that they were having difficulty with. Whilst there are variations in theory about why it works, co-counselling is similar to other humanistic approaches in acknowledging the value of working with catharsis.

From a practical point of view there seems to be no reason why co-counselling should have focused on cathartic work. Probably the reason why it has is that we live in such an anti-cathartic society. Given the supportive attention that co-counselling offers it is not long before many people start catharting, and once they do they generally find it an immensely positive experience.

However, with the client being in charge of the session there is enormous scope for trying different ways of working. CCI co-counsellors are apt, for instance, to borrow techniques from all sorts of personal growth and therapeutic approaches — anything, as long as it can be used self-directedly within the rules of co-counselling. The upshot is that analytical, behavioural, cognitive and transpersonal work all goes on in co-counselling sessions. One of the most useful links is with behavioural work in which planning to behaving differently in a situation ('goalsetting') can be combined with working on feelings about doing so, or having done so. Ann Dickson was actively involved in co-counselling, and this link lies behind her development of assertiveness training from its behavioural origins.

## *Co-counselling for therapists*

For therapists co-counselling offers a way of dealing with feelings and issues about clients, a link into a network of support, an (additional) way of doing their own personal development work or therapy and becoming more self-empowered and emotionally competent. And it is free.

I sometimes wonder why any therapist would *not* co-counsel. Is there a reason that is not, essentially, avoidance?

## *John Heron*

One of the important gifts which John has given to co-counselling is to go off to live in Tuscany and leave us to it. This is a practical demonstration of his determination that CCI should be an association of peers not contaminated by gurus and hierarchy, in sharp contrast to Harvey Jackins who still retains firm control of developments in RC. John is still active as a co-counsellor. He hosts a co-counselling event, usually each summer, in Italy and has run several workshops for co-counsellors in New Zealand over recent years.

Recently John has been attempting to develop co-counselling theory to incorporate more of a transpersonal dimension. The response to this is symptomatic of the state of CCI today. Some people have been all in favour of this development. Others have said it is irrelevant, unnecessary or a distraction. Yet others have said 'What's new — we

have been doing this work for years'. All these views can coexist in CCI. There is little sense that we have got to come to any decision about it, or that we have to do so 'because John Heron says so'. John himself supports this kind of pluralism.

In summary, then, CCI is mature, dynamic, growing and exciting.

## *Further Reading*


*Self & Society*, double issue on co-counselling, Vol VIII nos 4 & 5, 1980

Rose Evison and Richard Horobin, *How to Change Yourself and Your World*, Co-counselling Phoenix, 1990

CCI Internet web site: http://www.dpets.demon.co.uk/cciuk

John Heron, 'Original Theory of Co-counselling and the Paradigm Shift', http://home.stlnet.com/~ccounsel/


# Re-evaluation Counselling Today


## *Jo Saunders*


Re-evaluation Counselling (RC) is a tool. The people who use it have formed themselves into a loosely knit community that is world-wide. The organisation that is known as the RC Community has been in existence for some 46 years and in these islands probably 30 years. It has spread to 90 countries, and its means of organisation have not altered radically since its inception. It has simply grown bigger. Areas comprising about thirty co-counsellors are loosely organised with teachers, responsible for their individual students, who conduct support groups, beginning classes, and ongoing classes as well as local workshops. They choose someone to co-ordinate themselves, their Area Reference Person, who has overall responsibility for certifying teachers, editing local newsletters and ensuring that agreed policies and guidelines are implemented. Such areas are in their turn organised into Regions, each with their own Reference Person, whose function is to represent the region in the international community, and the international community in the region, on matters of policy, and to attend regional and international workshops and conferences. There are ten such organised regions in Britain and approxi-


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