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Whose future? Whose choosing?: Counselling in a context of (im)possible choice

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Abstract

Critically reflexive practice is at the heart of counselling, and even more so when clients come face to face with (im)possible choices. As counsellor educators, the authors show counselling practice at the edge of uncertainty. This article features a counselling context in a secondary school. It describes a fictional situation where action is called for in the midst of undecidability, at an impasse in the life of a young woman client. The article explores the aporia that confront the young woman and the counsellor, in the context of education, career, families, cultures and communities. The authors show that these explorations produced transformational questions for their teaching practice as counsellor educators.

Key words

School counselling, aporia, ethics, undecidability, decision-making, choice.

Prologue

This article arises out of our struggle to know how to go on¹ when we reach the limits of our teaching as feminist counsellor educators with white skins. We explore these limits by offering this account that considers potential responsibilities of both a school guidance counsellor and a young woman who meets with him in counselling. The particular developmental focus of the article is the meaning and management of fertility in heterosexual relationship, in an age and place where the timing of fertility runs ahead of the timing of many other aspects of psycho-socio-economic life. While (over)fertility is only one of the many aspects of sexuality young people might meet with school counsellors about, it is not only one of the most frequent, but also one of current community contention. Just this week as we revise this article for publication, a newspaper headline has declared “Schools Arrange Secret Abortions” (Neale, 2011, p. 1), and Police Minister Judith Collins has subsequently committed herself to supporting a private member’s bill to ensure that young women cannot access termination of



pregnancy without parental notification (Vance, 2011). The questions we hear being raised by school counsellors and young people—and by the poetry of Karla Mila at the end of this article—are not answered by such a turn to certainties.

In writing ourselves out of the silencing that we may experience in our work in counsellor education, we employ fiction as a method (see Davies, 2009; Richardson, 2000; Sparkes, 2002), drawing on our professional knowledge, experience and practice—in counselling, supervision and teaching—to offer an account resonant with our professional experience, while not replicating any particular life event or set of research materials. This fictional account takes us directly into the struggles and silencing we experience at the intersecting of myriad and strongly competing discourses that produce young women's lives, bodies, and choices. Our engagement with the lived experiences of young people, their families, school and youth counsellors, supervisors and teachers produces this writing as it lays out the complexities of ethics in a critically reflexive counselling practice, and as it lays out the (im)possibilities of choices that young people, and all who care for them, may face. In writing these limits, this article troubles neo-liberal interpretations of choice, and ideas of rational and reasoned decision-making (see Davies, 2005). It shows how enacting responsibility becomes a process of “dwelling in the aporia” (Wang, 2005, p. 55)—where, for both client and counsellor, the pain of uncertainty must be endured. For a counsellor charged with “seek[ing] to increase the range of choices and opportunities for clients” and promoting “the safety and well-being of individuals, families, communities, whanau, hapu and iwi” (New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2002), there is no clear way forward in an aporetic moment: both counsellor and client, must struggle to scrape, drag and scratch togetherⁱⁱ a decision for action, in the midst of uncertainty. Drawing on Derrida, Raffoul (2008) suggested that “ethics arises out of this aporia, of the not-knowing of responsible decision” (p. 285). Our fictional story begins.

Let's imagine a secondary school somewhere in provincial North Island, New Zealand. Let's imagine two young people, Libby and Sione, who attend this school. Libby is 17, year 12, heading to the national dance school. Since year 10, she has gone out with Sione, now 18, year 13, head boy and captain of the First XV, heading towards university and a law degree. They both star in school shows. They are both strong academically. They are a couple everyone in school looks up to. They shine in their young love: in so many ways their lives are lived on the terms of a heterosexual romantic narrative. They both embody cultural ideals that speak to their respective families' aspirations for them, ideals which might be understood as conventional or traditional: Sione is a handsome, strong, athletic, and poised young New Zealand-born Samoan man; and Libby is a beautiful, athletic, lithe, and poised young Pākehā woman whose UK-born parents immigrated to New Zealand to give their children opportunities. Sione and Libby are both serious, responsible citizens of their school, their communities, and their families. Their young love, and their individual standing as senior students and leaders in their school, appears not to have gone to their heads. Their families are both proud of them both. It appears that each of them is managing well the developmental tasks of adolescence, including the working out of a bicultural relationship.

The school guidance counsellor, Dave, enters this fictional account, when Libby makes an appointment to see him. She tells him she is pregnant. She has told only her parents, whose wish is that the pregnancy is terminated. This is Libby's wish too, she

explains—but, she says, what about Sione? She is finding it hard to keep this significant event from him. Yet, she says, she knows that telling him would change her life, even more irrevocably than the pregnancy has. She says that she thinks that Sione's Samoan culture and his religious convictions would not support the termination, were he to know. She knows that his older sister, Malia, had become pregnant at 16. The evident loss of virginity had brought much shame to the family, while the child to whom she gave birth was welcomed. Malia's baby had been gifted into the loving care of a relative who had been unable to conceive, and Malia returned to education, becoming a nurse. She is now married and has a new baby, the centre of the family's attention at present. The baby's older sibling remains with Malia's aunt, both children much loved by the wider family.

Libby explains to Dave that she and her parents made a decision for termination, because of her hopes for her future career. A medical appointment has been made, and now she just has to get through the next week. But as the days of the week pass, she has become more and more troubled by a sense of care for Sione, and worry that this decision has not included him. This is the question she brings to Dave: should she tell Sione or not.

Dave understands that a pregnancy now would have no narrative coherence in Libby's life. She is heading towards the national dance school. Her future holds the possibilities of an international career in dance. These dreams might be thwarted by an untimely pregnancy. Libby also has dreams of a future with Sione: she is beginning to think that these dreams might be thwarted by a secret termination.

In human development terms, Libby is at a critical point of change in her life, as an adolescent, and a young woman. She is faced with a significant moral dilemma. But the dilemma is not hers alone. Her parents and now Dave, the counsellor, are also members of the immediate discursive community faced with the dilemmas of this situation. Our story now turns towards Dave and his practice as a counsellor, as he grapples with the multiple meanings to be made, and responsibilities he carries. In Bauman's (1998) words, Dave's expression of ethics can be read as taking "*responsibility for one's responsibility*" (p. 17).

The following day: Dave's supervision group

We imagine Dave taking the step of meeting with his peer supervision groupⁱⁱⁱ the day after his meeting with Libby. It is his turn to consult the group this week. He brings questions about his meeting with Libby. He begins by speaking his awareness of the intersecting of discourses of gender and culture.

Dave: I found it so hard to know where to go, or what to say. As I listened to Libby and responded to her, the situation seemed more and more complex. On one hand, it seems like it is Libby's individual decision: it's her body and her future. Feminism taught me this years ago. From this perspective, I could say that this is an informed decision that Libby has made. Her parents support her in this decision; it's theirs as much as hers. So in that way, it's a family decision, in Libby's best interests, and in the interests of her future. At the same time as I know this, I am also confronted with the question of what my responsibility might be to the young man and his family. I am left with questions about the collective sense of responsibility of Sione's family, and their cultural practices—not to mention the

religious side of it. When discourses compete or collide or when they are so far apart, I can get so stuck. There's no "right" answer. I feel for them all.

- Sue: Dave, I see how it is hard, but as a feminist my first thought is that feminism supported women to be in a position to make these decisions about our bodies. I am pleased that Libby sees herself as someone who can make the decision and not abandon her hopes for her future as a dancer. Mistakes happen and women should not carry the burden of these for the rest of our lives. We have come a long way to make this possible. For me there is no compromising on young women's rights over their own bodies.
- Mari: Sue, Sione is a young *Samoan* man. His family is a *Samoan* family and they may not ascribe the same value to individual choice as you do as a *Pākehā* woman. You know, so often western feminism got this wrong, this idea of individual choice, this focus on the individual—just like western human development, come to think of it. We have to keep questioning ideas about individual rights and choices.
- Sophie: We can sit and question these ideas, but this young woman has to make a choice within the next few days and Dave has to find his way around the ethics of it all. What would you say your responsibilities are, Dave, and who would you say you are responsible to?
- Brendon: Can I just say first, if we are talking responsibility—and it seems pretty risky to even name this—but I think we have a responsibility not just to ask questions about ideas of individual rights, but also to ask questions about collective rights. If I think of some of the young women in my school, it would seem like women's bodies may not always be treated with respect in collective cultures either. Sue, there are times that I find it hard to think about what we have gained from feminism. There are ways in which feminism romanticised women: are we in danger of romanticising culture if that is what we put first? As counsellors we get to hear how not all women work for the sisterhood, not all kids are cared for by their families, not all faith communities serve in the ways they claim, collective cultures do not always care for their own.
- Sophie: Well, this is why I was asking about responsibility. In this group, you don't expect me as a *Māori* counsellor to give you answers or guidance every time we are struggling about culture and difference. I appreciate that. It feels like we can do partnership if we keep asking questions together. Yes, this is a young *Pākehā* woman and a young *Samoan* man, and how would it be different if it was the other way around, if she was *Samoan* and he was *Pākehā*, or if their families' hopes weren't resting on them? What if they weren't the top-of-the-class kids, but were scraping along, just surviving, at school? Would we see a pregnancy differently, then?
- Dave: Sophie, that's just it. I went online last night and I found this article (Cherrington & Breheny, 2005) that takes a critical look at how our society thinks about teenage pregnancy. Thinking about how I feel stuck between these opposing ideas about communal culture and individual

choice and so on, I highlighted this sentence: “Is what is being said about our young people part of rhetoric shaping them to inhabit the dominant subject positions of a racist, gendered, capitalist society, which gives production and consumption primacy over raising children? ... What is too young and why?” (p. 107). Sophie, I ask myself under which circumstances would I think that individual choice is secondary or primary, or necessary or not necessary, or that a pregnancy is inevitably private or inevitably social. I find *myself* so uncertain as I think about Libby’s growing uncertainty about whether or not Sione should be told.

Back to the previous day, Libby and Dave

As this imagined supervision conversation illustrates, these imagined decisions that Libby must make are larger than her, or any young woman about whom we might have written. These decisions are located in particular discursive communities—and yet, inevitably, they work out on her body.

For both Dave, and Libby, this is a moment of undecidability, in Derridean (1993) terms, an aporia—an impasse where a single “right” solution is not possible and yet there is a responsibility to take some action.

... responsibility has radical ethical and political implications, as it removes the guarantee of the absolute and leaves an uncertain condition for inventing singular responses. However, such a questioning of the foundation does not necessarily lead to its negation, but intends continually to open up what is excluded by the force of founding. (Wang, 2005, p. 49).

Libby is pulled in two ways at once in this situation where there is no single “right” solution. Libby somehow has to manage herself, manage her identity, and in the midst of this life-changing event to act with responsibility to self and others. A material, physical, hormonal event has interrupted the story she has known about herself. She has known herself as a young woman who is a dancer, who is a senior leader, who acts with responsibility for herself and others; and suddenly that story has been taken over. While it is possible for her to become un-pregnant, she cannot move outside of the story of having made the decision to terminate and having acted upon it. It might be said that she has access to exercising agency (see Davies, 1991) in so far as she recognises the calls offered by the foundations of feminism or culture, for example, and then accepts, resists, changes or refuses these calls. Recognition and response to these calls inevitably have consequences for relationship with self and other. A post-pregnant state is not necessarily restitution of a pre-pregnant state: Libby’s story of herself, and of responsibility, is inevitably as transformed as her body.

On one hand there is the question that she experiences as more decidable: she will have the termination, as she and her parents have discussed. That action has become decided for her, but the aporia remains. What continues to be undecidable is how she manages her story of her relationship with Sione, previously told on untroubled heteronormative, “have and hold” (see Jackson & Cram, 2003), discursive terms. He is her best friend, her training partner, her confidante, an admirer of her body, that lithe body with which she suddenly experiences a more ambivalent relationship. She is his

best friend, his training partner, his confidante, an admirer of his body, that strong body with which she also now experiences an ambivalent relationship.

The aporia Libby faces about whether or not to tell Sione can be understood as a moral dilemma of how one behaves towards another person, “a crisis of choice, of action and identity” (Burbules, 1997, p. 34). As Libby explores the impasse, the question arises of what Sione’s status is. How is he constituted by her silence or by her speaking? As she considers these questions, her lived relationships with Sione and his family have shaped her sense of responsibility to consider “the tension between individuality and sociality”, which she has, until now, experienced as a “generative site for reformulating the relations between self and other” (Wang, 2005, p. 54). She has benefited from the communal cultural practice and warm embrace of Sione’s family. But now she comes face to face with the implications of that inclusive embrace. How are his family, this family that have made her almost one of their own, constituted by a decision to tell or not to tell? What are Libby’s responsibilities to Sione and to his parents? And would telling Sione inevitably be the same as telling his family? As a young Samoan man, where might he see his responsibilities lying? How is he constituted if Libby assumes that he will inevitably privilege family or cultural values in ways that insist on the pregnancy continuing? Or will his family support the young people in their career aspirations and accept the termination? Libby is challenging herself with the task of considering Sione both as an individual and as a member of a cultural group:

The particulars [of people’s lives] suggest that others live as we perceive ourselves living, not as robots programmed with “cultural” rules, but as people going through life agonizing over decisions, making mistakes, trying to make themselves look good, enduring tragedies and personal losses, enjoying others, and finding moments of happiness. (Abu-Lughod, 2006, p. 164)

These agonising ethical questions that we imagine Libby bringing to her conversation with Dave, and that we imagine them struggling with together, take Libby into a process of transformation. Although this dilemma might be described, in neo-liberal terms, as “a decision” requiring Libby to make a “choice”, it is not a rational, autonomous choice that is required of her. For this story in which she finds herself is what Frank (1997) referred to as a chaos story, where restitution is unavailable, and where she cannot care for every participant equally. There is no clear direction: “When I have too many choices, or no choices, I don’t have a choice: I am stuck. *I don’t know how to go on*” (Burbules, 1997, p. 34). In ways she has not experienced before, Libby finds herself putting her identity together through a process of scraping, catching and dragging (Barthes, 1977), as she endeavours to re-inscribe herself as living a responsible life. Dave’s responses to Libby contribute to the scraping, dragging and scratching of putting together an identity story in the midst of aporia.

While this situation is particular to Libby, her family, Sione, and his family, Dave also notices a generalisability in her story: he often sits with young women who bring to his counselling room complex ethical and practical questions relating to their sexual lives. Dave thus understands the aporia that Libby faces as having a history in the lives of women. For example, second wave feminism emphasised the importance of careers for women, with the effect that most contemporary New Zealand young women take for granted their right to a career. A discourse of reproductive autonomy was also produced

by second wave feminism. Another dimension of second wave's efforts to de-throne patriarchal authority is seen in a call to return to what's "natural", and is seen, for example, in the romanticising and idealising of pregnancy, childbirth, babies and family—at the same time as the whole concept of family came under feminist critique. Feminism's histories have many traces in the lives young women and men at Dave's school. He hears these traces as he hears their stories, and he has the double task to both hear the uniqueness of their accounts and to listen for how those accounts are shaped by the available discourses. His responses to young people will have the effect of making aspects of their lives speakable, or not. He is not a neutral bystander.

As he responds to Libby in this scarcely speakable aporia she is facing, as she considers whether or not Sione should be told of this pregnancy, Dave contributes to the subject positions available to Libby, to Sione, and to himself. He, too, faces an aporia. As an adult man, as a professional, he is called to tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity, both in Libby's story and in the moment-by-moment unfolding of the counselling conversation. What is there in his own life story that might support him to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty? As he witnesses the undecidability of Libby's situation, he thinks of his own 16-year-old daughter, and feels the pull of patriarchal discourses of care and protection. Immediately arising from this positioning, he experiences an instantaneous anger: *these two bright young people have the knowledge to have avoided this situation. How dare they bring this problem to their two families who have both worked so hard to make opportunities available?* But this thought, too, is fleeting: the momentary anger has gone and what remains is a deep sense of compassion for these families, for these young people. He sees how they and he are caught up in the (im)possibility of rational choice, and in the (im)possibility of certainty. He proceeds on the basis that "reason is always situated, local and specific, formed by values, passion and desires" (St Pierre, 2000, p. 487).

Libby and her parents had reached a place of decision, even if temporary: the medical appointment has been made, and they have decided not to tell Sione. But here is Libby, caught between her anguish about Sione's exclusion from this most important event and what had seemed like the good sense of the decision not to tell. Dave reflects on the (im)possibility of rational choice, at the same time as he positions himself to make wise professional choices in each moment of this conversation with Libby. He decides to focus on the aspect of the situation that is most troubling Libby: the telling or not telling. He holds the belief that the troubles that concern young people are often woven into cultural stories that conceal how these stories work in young people's lives. Davies (1993) wrote about this sort of concealment as being like a pane of glass that is not visible until it is cracked. The implications for counselling are that by asking questions about the glass that forms the lens through which we look, we get to see how our looking is shaped, and so to take a position on both the looking and the shaping, even in moments of impasse. In this moment, as Dave asks about the meanings ascribed to telling or not telling, the counselling room becomes a sacred space where suffering is transformed into social compassion and meaning-making, as Libby speaks about what she cares for in her life, alongside what her family, community and culture care for. Hearing the care that she holds, Dave also recognises "the shifting landscapes of cultural ... practices" (Agee et al., 2011, p. 29). His responses to Libby come out of an ethic of critique, supported by his professional supervision community—writing in the context of health care, Murray (2009) suggested that professionals should give

... attention to our very own practices, and a thoughtful attention to those discourses that make our particular practices seem to us to be true or right. This means to question what is taken for granted, to question the aporias, the blind spots... We must squarely face those places of paradox and impasse.... (p. 13)

In squarely facing the paradox and impasse, Dave gently asks Libby, “In not telling, what are you hoping for, Libby?” As she replies, he continues to inquire: “What does not telling protect?” Later, as Libby speaks of her care for Sione, he reflectively responds, “In telling Sione, Libby, what would you hope for?” As their conversation explores the aporia of this (im)possible choice, a small possibility begins to emerge as they explore the effects of the immediacy of the situation. Responding to the effects of immediacy, as Libby has described them, Dave asks a question beyond the immediate, not knowing where the question might lead: “What difference might it make if the telling happens at another time, rather than immediately?” Both Dave and Libby are faced with the (im)possibility of knowing, of certainty, but with a need for care-ful action.

Coda

School and youth counsellors meet with young people living through some extremely difficult and demanding life changes and experiences. For some young people, it seems to be almost all struggle and ongoing unfairness, at times the pain inscribed on their bodies. Other young people emerge with hard-won grace or a rugged determination. These young people’s stories are often inscribed on the lives of school counsellors—as well as on our lives as teachers of counselling when, in aporetic moments, we reach the limits of our teaching, when how to go on is not clear. In these (im)possible places one refraction of compassion, care and wisdom may make another view impossible as we “seek to increase the range of choices and opportunities for clients” and to “promote the safety and well-being of individuals, families, communities, whanau, hapu and iwi” (New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2002). In our struggle for critically reflexive counselling practice at these complex intersections, particularly of gender and culture, we turn to the poet Karla Mila (2005), a woman who describes herself as of Samoan, Palangi, and Tongan descent. This poem, “Virgin Loi”, seems to speak directly to and for us and our struggles, and for counsellors and young people whose lives have touched ours.

Virgin Loi

looking back
do I wish I had a Tongan mother
who guarded my chastity
with a Bible in one hand
and a taufale in the other?
instead of my pale, polite palangi mum
who gave me the freedom to choose
and understood that all the rest of the girls I knew
used tampons

do I wish I had a Tongan mother
who put the fear of God himself into me
so that in the heat of many moments
I'd say No
I'm worth more
let's see the rock
buy me shit
and treat me like a princess
(until after we are married
and then I will be your baby making
black eyed doormat)

those Tongan girls
I see them stare
see my skin half palangi fair
I watch your nostrils flare
I see you sio lalo

I know the coconut wireless
is so efficient
that I cannot get away
with what's actually true
let alone what is pure libel

once I thought I had a choice
and a right to choose
and I believed that ignorance
wasn't bliss
and experience
led to wisdom

I see you sio lalo

so what, I say
I won't wear white on my wedding day
cream suits me better anyway
I say
laughing on the outside
but on the inside
my hymen is broken.

(pp. 23–24)^{iv}

A question Karla Mila's poem raises for us is whether our students might describe us as "pale, polite, palangi" women teachers in the face of their aporetic struggles at competing intersections of gender and culture. As we reach this question we see that this (fictional) account has offered us "a place where thoughts can emerge" (Davies, 2009, p. 198). Our experience resonates with Davies' (2009) description of the process of writing fiction in social science:

... writing that would open me up to difference, to seeing differently, to being different ... a process of writing in which the world is not

produced in an attempt to represent what I know already, but pushes me out into other ways of knowing, into the tangled possibility of intersecting, colliding, and separate lives. (p. 198)

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i We use this phrase from Wittgenstein (1958, cited in Drewery, 2005, p. 314).

ii We appropriate from Barthes (1977, p.63) who wrote of decomposing himself, through scrap[ing], catch[ing] and drag[ging].

iii The New Zealand Association of Counsellors Code of Ethics (2002) requires all members to consult about their practices through regular supervision.

iv The authors thank Karla Mila and Huia Press for permission to quote “Virgin Loi” from *Dream Fish Floating*.

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