

Uses of writing to counter the silence of oppression: counselling women at USP

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Introduction

This paper explores reflective and expressive writing as a means of overcoming the silencing of women and their experience in a uniquely multi-cultural setting at the University of the South Pacific (USP). Extensive research, mostly based on American studies, has shown the benefits of self-disclosure in writing for physical health as well as psychological well-being.

'Traditionally women are seen and not heard'

Moving from Britain to the University of the South Pacific, though to work in a very familiar role, required a steep learning curve on my part. I was acutely aware of our differences: my white British working-class background and middle-class education and the multitude of cultures in the University of the South Pacific. There are over 1,500 differing languages in the Pacific, 'reflecting hundreds of cultures and world views.'² In addition there are international students: Japanese, Brazilian, American and French. Providing cultural specific counselling would be logistically impossible.

Counselling at the University of the South Pacific (USP) has a long tradition. A counsellor has been in post since the founding of the university in 1968. Serving twelve nations in the region, in recent years 45% of students registered for courses at the university, whether on campus or by distance

learning, are female. The Counselling Centre referred to in this study is based at the main university campus in Fiji. The language of instruction at the university is English. A counselling team of three and one secretary/receptionist offers educational and career counselling in addition to personal and crisis counselling. My counselling colleagues at the time of writing, one male and one female were local people who had trained outside the region. Counselling has its roots in Europe and North America and in many ways has little in common with traditional healing. Katz contrasts the 'scientific' and 'explicitly aspiritual' process of becoming a health care professional in the west with the traditional process of becoming a Fijian healer.³ Not surprisingly, some assumptions underpinning the work of the Counselling Centre, such as confidentiality or a more non-directive orientation, are often misunderstood by students and staff at USP. Although culture-centred in my approach,⁴ and experienced as a counsellor in multi-cultural settings and in working internationally, I was looking for a way to bridge the gap between myself and my clients in terms of their expectations and my culture shock.

I looked to the creative writing of the region and especially that of Pacific women to help me overcome the differences between my clients and me.

The poetry and fiction of Samoan Sia Fiegel and the work of Tongan educationist and poet, Konai Helu-Thaman were particularly valuable in my re-orientation. Statistical tables and sociological overviews were

also useful but the political and personal came together in the creative writing, sometimes literally so, such as in the poetry of Ni-Vanuatu poet, Grace Mera Molisa.

Speaking on a woman's perspective on AIDS Konai Helu-Thaman, who is also the Head of the School of Humanities at USP says,

*"....women are often left out of major decision-making processes with men often speaking on their behalf because they are often better educated and because they have always done so."*⁵

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Women at USP are clearly part of a minority of both men and women in the region who are highly educated but the tradition of leaving the men to lead, to speak, to decide

continues. In the unique cultural diversity of the university, the patriarchal tradition seemed a unifying factor. Helu-Thaman continues,

"My plea to men today is give women a chance. Listen to their views. Listen especially to their silences. We all know that most Pacific women have been socialised into roles of passivity, especially in relation to their reproductive and social roles."⁵

The women's voices I heard in counselling at USP were expressing the same feelings of fear or sadness in response to life events which I had witnessed in counselling rooms in universities and colleges in Britain and in USA and which are universal.⁶ However, in relation to these social and reproductive roles, I found some commonality in terms of the issues women were bringing to counselling but also some important differences

- **unwanted pregnancy** – contraception is not widely accepted nor available and abortion is illegal in Fiji;
- **domestic violence** - is the most common form of assault in Fiji and held to be a 'normal' part of marriage in most areas of the USP region;
- **divorce** – a woman's rights to custody of her children and to an equal share of matrimonial property are very limited.

In addition, the collective way of life, 'the Pacific way' is a concept I could read about and attempt to understand in discussion with colleagues and friends but found very hard to work with in the emotional domain. Gilligan's analysis illuminated some of the barriers for women who had had the courage to overcome the stigma and fear of approaching a counsellor but did not feel entitled to express their feelings as an individual,⁷

"But many women feared that others would condemn or hurt them if they spoke, that others would not listen or understand, that speaking would only lead to further confusion, that it was better to appear 'selfless,' to give up their voices and keep the peace."⁷

The pressure to conform to the collective need, to put family and community before self, is strong in Pacific societies for both men and women.² Strategies initiated by the Counselling Centre to support students, from a uniquely diverse, regional university community, included some methods which harnessed the power of peer education and peer counselling. The Counselling Centre had always played a proactive part in preventive and developmental work on campus, including academic peer tutoring⁸ and AIDS/STD Awareness,⁹ developed sometimes in the face of resistance from some religious and traditional quarters.

In individual counselling, because of linguistic and cultural barriers, and apparent shame and embarrassment that some women felt in telling their story, I suggested using expressive and exploratory writing. For some clients, my suggestion tied in with personal writing they had been doing for some time:

"Sometimes, I can write these headaches away. Things I've never told anyone, not even my family – they seem to be too hard to say but I can put them on paper." (Female student, USP, 1998)

Writing and reading as adjuncts to finding a voice

In common with some teachers, especially creative writing teachers, counsellors give students permission to "gather pain into language".¹⁰ The need to tell the story, to disclose difficult experiences to other people is not only to give the

teller some 'peace of mind', although the benefits both physiological and psychological to the teller of putting stress into words, spoken or written, have been well documented.^{11,12,13,14,15} There is

also the need to warn the hearer and the community, to contribute to the collective experience about possible dangers and the lessons learned:

"you must know all about this, from your own shivering life"¹⁶.

Clifton is a black American poet whose work I have recommended to some of the South Pacific women who have come for counselling.¹⁶ Gilligan (1993) observes.

"At present, I find that women writers, and especially African-American poets and novelists who draw on an oral/aural tradition and also on searing and complex experiences of difference, are taking a lead in voicing an art that responds to the question which now preoccupies many people: how to give voice to difference in a way that recasts our discussion of relationship and the telling of truth."¹⁷

The links between Pacific writers and other writers both from the former Commonwealth and from the African-American tradition are illuminating. In 'A Writer's Story', Fiegel (1998) refers to the influence of a reading by Morrison,

"While in Berlin I joined a Creative Writing Group – members from Nigeria, China, London, US, Caribbean. I had never been to a reading then and didn't know what it was. The first 'reading' I went to was by Toni Morrison. One that changed my life. Literally."¹⁷

She continues to describe the search for a female voice in writing, a need referred to by Bass and Davis in the context of women survivors of abuse as 'defining your own reality'.¹⁸

**"Sometimes, I can write these headaches away. Things I've never told anyone, not even my family – they seem to be too hard to say but I can put them on paper."
(Female student, USP)**

*'It was after reading the works of Toni Morrison – the great Black-American writer – that I saw the possibility in the voice of girls, adolescents and yes, women. Because of the influence of Albert Wendt it became really impossible to write since one just did not know how to write as a woman – since the perspective was so omnipresent in its male-ness.'*¹⁷

I would recommend Fiegel's work to counselling clients, especially female clients. Using reading and writing as adjuncts to therapy has been new to some of the women I have worked with in British educational settings as well as at USP. Art therapy, music, dance and drama therapy are well recognised but writing less so. The linguistic and cultural isolation of some students from remote parts of the USP catchment compounds the need for and difficulty of self-expression however.

"Will it help?" one student asked. She was speaking to me in her third language, English. She came back the following week enthusiastically showing me pages of writing in her first language and pictures, describing her feelings of being stifled in her marriage and abused in childhood."

One clear advantage of therapeutic writing as an adjunct to face-to-face counselling is not only that there is no fear of judgement or exposure, if the writing remains private, but that the materials are always available at any time.

"It's at 4 o'clock in the morning, when I can't sleep, that's when I get the pen and paper out." (Female student, USP, 1998).

Several of the students I have counselled have, since childhood, kept a journal or diary and find the idea of 'free writing' or 'writing without thinking' a useful adaptation of the 'reflections on paper' method they have already discovered.

Finding a place private enough to keep these writings can be problematic, especially in a society where individual privacy is often not possible, nor very highly-prized. Again, the process for some women students of identifying the right to have and express her own thoughts and feelings raises complex cultural and gender issues. When we then discuss her entitlement to a place where these writings can not only be expressed but either stored to be read later or destroyed, more potential barriers emerge. With some sensitivity and cultural awareness on the part of the counsellor, the discussion is not culturally oppressive but empowering, essentially client-centred in the Rogerian sense. Privacy is a very Western concept and could be judged as a function of the ex-patriot counsellor's experience and

world-view. In this context however, it seemed to me to be more about the right to self-expression.

The 'low-tech', inexpensive and easily accessed nature of writing is one of the advantages of using writing in counselling, especially in a university context, where, in spite of the strong oral traditions of the Pacific, writing is clearly an everyday expectation of all students. This is not to deny the continuing power of the oral tradition but its role is in conveying the collective rather than the individual reality and in creating and re-creating myth and legend.

The new technologies and particularly email have proved to be particularly liberating for some. One student wrote, *"I can't face coming into the Counselling Centre - someone might see me and tell my husband. Could I write to you by email?"* (Female student, USP, 1998).

Gaining confidence by writing about her experience of domestic violence, this mother of three young children eventually did come into the Counselling Centre to speak about her strategies for escaping an abusive marriage.

Although every student at USP is entitled to their own email address, the use of email is very much limited by the shortage of machines and long queues to use the computer labs. Few students would have access to their own personal compu-

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ter.

Letter writing has been used extensively in various theoretical orientations as part of a therapeutic process and can be particularly powerful, whether the letters are sent or not. I have been struck by the expression of shock on some women's faces when I have been encouraging them and negotiating with them to write letters uninhibitedly to people who have hurt them. Being in control, being entitled to decide whether to send these letters which may express strong feelings written in strong language is empowering.

In some areas of communal and family life, in disciplining children, for example, women in some South Pacific communities do have control. However, they may have little control of the personal and the intimate. The message I am wanting to convey especially to women who have assumed that violence in marriage, for example, is 'normal' and that their talking about it is in some way a betrayal of their husband, family and community is.

"You can work this through on paper, expressing some of the feelings of fear and anger, with no risk to yourself or anyone else - you know your own feelings best - trust yourself"

Setting aside racial and cultural differences, as a member of the university staff in a society where status and hierarchy are still rigidly respected, there is a power imbalance to overcome before counsellor and student can work closely. Whether an equal relationship, even in feminist counselling can ever be achieved is problematic.¹⁹ I am trained and in a paid position to offer help; the students who come to the Counselling Centre are usually lacking confidence, in some state of distress and needing help. One of the objectives of the writing assignments is to remove my presence and to empower clients to find a way of expressing themselves which is entirely their's, not mine. I make it very clear that there is no compunction to share this writing with me and that there is no need to be grammatical or correct but to focus on expressing feelings and telling the story.

Bass and Davis refer to the basic method of 'free writing' in working with women survivors of child sexual abuse, *'It's not about making art or polished crafting or trying to make sense to someone else. Rather it short-circuits some of your censors to get to what you need to say.'*¹⁸

Silence

Gilligan (1993) observes, *"Choices not to speak are often well-intentioned and psychologically protective, motivated by concerns for people's feelings and by an awareness of the realities of one's own and others' lives."*⁷

Keeping silent about incest, sexual and other forms of abuse in childhood and in adult life is based on a realistic assessment of the repressive forces of culture and religion in the USP region. The Fiji Women's Crisis Centre has published a collection of stories, poems and essays, 'Breaking the Silence' (1998) written by women who have been supported by the Centre.²⁰ The introduction includes the following tribute to those who choose to speak out and also refers to the therapeutic potential of the writing,

*'It has taken the writers a great deal of courage to write candidly about their traumatic experiences. The writing process has also assisted women to reflect and come to terms with what has happened in their lives, and has given them a chance to look back on their own strengths, courage and achievements. For many this has been an empowering and therapeutic process.'*²⁰

The silence I witnessed amongst some of the women who came as clients to the Counselling Centre could possibly be interpreted in a number of ways: was this a safe place? would their words be heard outside? The posters and stickers in my counselling room, produced by the Fiji Women's Crisis

Centre and the Fiji Women's Rights Movement, made my position on certain issues very clear but what else could this person assume about me? In part I'm sure there were doubts about trust and confidentiality but the block was at least in part the silence of oppression.²¹ As counsellor, I was looking for ways to invite these women to move from their isolation to a connection, even if that process might start in the privacy of their own writing.

Summary

Although not confined to the South Pacific region, it is common for women to feel shamed by their experience and silenced, both by that individual experience and by the wider implications of patriarchy as defined in their particular culture. Typically, the feelings associated with negative experiences are internalised, leaving the woman feeling isolated, especially in the university environment where other pressures, both personal and academic pertain.

Some of these women students have used the Counselling Centre at the USP, often, though not always triggered by a crisis. Their feelings of anger and frustration, grief and powerlessness, if left unexpressed, as well as damaging their health^{11,12,13} can limit their ability to learn and to fulfil their potential, whether in their academic or personal life.

Using reflective and expressive writing as a means of making sense of experience and of telling the hitherto untold story has been well researched in various contexts. Since returning to work at a counselling service in a British university, I have found Bolton's work on the therapeutic potential of creative writing particularly useful. It has also underlined for me the commonality of women's need for self-expression, in whatever cultural context.²² Women who are traditionally trained from early childhood to be silent and obedient and who may not be able to talk to anyone about

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their experience can make very good use of paper and pen. Feminism and writing by women have a crucial role in the Pacific as this extract from 'At the Dawn of 'the Pacific Century' 'a place for Pacific Feminism'²³ points out,

*'Furthermore, the contributions in this collection exemplify the recognition feminism gives to the importance of writing, in its various forms, as a means of producing vital knowledge for feminism's use.'*²³

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the female students at the USP who generously agreed to the anonymous quoting of their comments and contributions and my colleagues at the Counselling Centre for support.

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One stops being a child when one realises that telling
one's trouble does not make it better.

Cesare Parvese 1908-1950
in *The Business of Living: Diaries 1935-50*