An Intervention with an Adolescent Incest Victim/Abuser

Wes G. Darou
McGill University

Abstract

Clinical work with clients who are both victims and also sexual abusers is complex and troubling. The present article describes one session of the treatment of a 14-year-old victim/offender. The approach combines the story-telling technique of Richard Gardner and the fantasy work of Violet Oaklander. These methods are particularly useful for overcoming resistance. As counselling continues, however, the client must move towards a more conscious understanding in dealing with the problem to prevent recurrence of the incidents of abuse.

Résumé

Le travail clinique avec les clients qui sont en même temps victimes et abuseurs d'abus sexuel est difficile et troublant. L'article actuel décrit une séance avec une victime/abuseur de 14 ans. L'approche se sert de la technique "raconteur" de Richard Gardner et de la technique de fantasmes de Violet Oaklander. Ces méthodes sont utiles pour dépasser les résistances. Cependant, durant le traitement, il faut que le client fasse face à ses actes. Si non, on ne pourrait pas prévenir une répétition de l'abus.

The treatment of young victims of sexual abuse makes up an increasing proportion of many helping professionals' clinical practice. The work is difficult, and it is troubling to both the client and the professional. Counsellors may have to listen to a child's excruciating feelings of shame, confusion and grief, or may have to deal with their own aversion to the incestuous abuse of children.

The treatment is doubly important because many male victims in turn become abusers. Finkelhor (1986) has said that the experience of sexual abuse does not necessarily cause the victim to become an abuser because 70% of aggressors were never abused. However, this leaves 30% that were abused, three times higher than Finkelhor's own estimates of the level of abuse in the population. Finkelhor (1987) has stated, "I have no intention of denying the relation between sexual abuse experienced in childhood and the role it can play in the creation of abusers" (p. 8). Finkelhor was asked in a conference if he would hire a male baby sitter who had been sexually abused. He responded, "Yes, if he had completed a successful therapy" (Finkelhor, personal communication, May 1987). This statement shows both Finkelhor's clarity of thought and his respect and openness for the victims of abuse.

To work successfully with victims/abusers, the counsellor needs a solid repertoire of methods and abilities. The present article describes the approach used in one early session with a 14-year-old client. The boy was a victim of father/child incest, and a subsequent juvenile offender whose victims were three girls aged from 4 to 10 years. The session was meant as

an opening to help the offender feel understood without forcing him to drop his defences of denial and repression immediately. The final goal of the therapy was for the client to have a direct understanding of his behaviour without denial and a clear sense of his obligations when presented with potential victims (Palframan, 1982). Because 14-year-old clients often resist the more common therapies (Beutler & Crago, 1986), approaches by Gardner (1986) and Oaklander (1978) were integrated into the session.

Richard Gardner is an analytically-trained child psychiatrist from New Jersey. He is the author of several innovative methods in child psychiatry including several charming games (Gardner, 1973). His best-known method is the mutual story-telling technique. In Gardner's technique, the therapist responds to a child's story by matching it with another story—one with the same basic feelings and situation as the child's, but with an ending that resolves the conflict with a healthier adaptation. Gardner then asks the child to state a moral to make the story's message more explicit. The technique is simple to describe but requires quick thinking and good empathy to execute.

Another well-known therapy for children and adolescents is the Gestalt approach of Violet Oaklander (1978). Like Gardner, she trains therapists and has a large private practice. Her book (Oaklander, 1978) is a manual of practice for many clinics. Much of her technique revolves around the creative use of fantasy. Children are helped to express their feelings through drawing, play, story-telling or guided fantasy. The child may share the experience of making a drawing, describe it, elaborate on details, identify with certain objects, exaggerate certain parts, reverse the roles, or do one of any number of Gestalt-like techniques. In the session described below, Oaklander's approach is used to set up the story, and Gardner's approach is used to get closure. The client himself, made up the plot.

THE CLIENT

At intake, the client, Frankie, was visibly troubled but resistant and not particularly verbal. As a result the counsellor decided to use approaches that were relatively creative. Frankie was a 14-year-old boy with two sisters and a young half-brother. He was somewhat delayed academically and emotionally, but was athletic and generally capable. His mother had died of an embolism when he was eight. The family was chaotic, impoverished and disempowered. About a year after the death, he and one sister were molested over a period of months by their depressed father. The children were placed in group homes and the father was charged with sexual assault and imprisoned. Three children, including Frankie, returned home after the father received psychotherapy and remarried.

At 13, Frankie was found "lying on top" of the four-year-old daugther of a friend of the family. Later that year he twice fondled pre-teen girls near a local swimming pool. He was then referred for counselling by a youth protection agency. The session described here occurred two months into treatment.

THE SESSION

Frankie was first induced into a deep relaxation. In that state he was presented with a guided fantasy about swimming underwater in the ocean. In the fantasy, he was asked to swim into a cave, and gradually discern some object at the back of the cave. After coming out of the fantasy, he said he did not see an object. He was then asked to close his eyes and try again. This time he described each step of the fantasy as it happened. He was slowly able to see a large, smiling flying-fish (the counsellor chose to interpret the fish as representing the father because the father had a big smile and liked to fish). Frankie introduced himself to the fish. The fish replied that he was going to eat him. Frankie said he would run away if the fish tried, but then he began to tease the fish. The fish then said he did not want to eat him, he only wanted to be his friend. Frankie was asked to identify with the fish and then was asked if the fish was telling the truth, or if it was just a ploy. He said the fish was being truthful. However, when Frankie got within two metres, the fish lunged at him. Frankie backed off, waited a bit then swam out of the cave as quickly as he could, leaving the fish behind. He went to the surface for air. A few minutes later, he felt a fin brush his foot, and then the fish ate him.

At that point (and still within the fantasy), the counsellor, using Gardner's technique, gave Frankie an alternate ending. Frankie felt the fin brush his foot, then he swam very, very hard. Because he was so athletic he was able to reach a safe island where the fish could not reach him. He said with a seductive tone, "Nyah, nyah, you can't get me, but I'll come back swimming tomorrow." Frankie said he actually had no intention of swimming there again. The counsellor asked for a moral to the story. Frankie offered the following one: "Young boys should not be eaten by flying fish." The counsellor countered with, "That is very good moral, but I see it as 'Flying fish should not eat young boys.' Young boys must escape from hungry flying fish" (thus putting the responsibility on the abuser not the victim, but still encouraging the victim to resist). Finally the counsellor asked what fish young boys should eat. Frankie said they should not eat small fish at all or fish out of season. In fact they should only eat legal-sized pike and pickerel.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the fantasy is fairly straightforward. The story contained sexual imagery such as a cave, fish, and a swimming pool. After some

initial resistance (not seeing anything in the cave), the client presented some good material. The client was pehaps sexual when he was teasing the fish but was apparently well protected in that he could escape. However, he was vulnerable to the self-deception of his father (i.e., when the fish said he just wanted to be friends). Note that the client could easily identify as the fish. Everything the fish said or did could readily be applied to the client either as an abuser or as a victim. Both were ambivalent; both wanted friendships; both were teasing.

At the end of the fantasy, the counsellor chose to change the ending into one that was more adaptive, i.e., the client was able to be assertive when faced with the abuser and thus able to escape to a safe place. The struggle and effort to escape was included so the client would not revert to a magical solution. An alternate ending was considered where Frankie would discuss the situation assertively with the fish and leave under more control. This was felt to be an unrealistic expectation of the father's behaviour but was held in reserve.

The exchange of morals at the end of the story was meant to state the message firmly that it was not acceptable for a father to abuse his son and that it was the responsibility of the adult in the relationship, not the child, to prevent such abuse. On the other hand, the client had no right to harm younger children in turn. This important message was further emphasized in the interchange about what fish he was allowed to eat.

The session left some unfinished business. There remained the problem of Frankie's fantasy seductiveness, and perhaps the client's fear that the father would repeat the offence ("I'm going swimming again tomorrow"). And at that point in the therapy, there remained the question of how much insight Frankie had about his real-life situation.

There could be some criticism of the above technique by child protection specialists. They sometimes believe that counsellors should confront abuse directly. However, in this case, confrontation was repeatedly met with confusion and resistance on the part of the client. To be safe, the child protection authority was asked to remain in the case. Months later, Frankie spontaneously expressed great regret about "what he had done to those little girls," and to date there has been no known recurrence of abuse.

To prevent recurrence of abuse, the fantasy exercises must gradually move closer to reality and consciousness. This can be done in later sessions by asking the client to describe how the fantasy reflects his real life. The counsellor must become very blunt so as not to support denial. The counsellor might say, for example, "I don't want you to go to the pool because you have sexual feelings for the children there." Also, periodic follow-up sessions may be necessary to prevent the client from stepping back to semi-automatic pleasure seeking.

CONCLUSIONS

The work of Oaklander and Gardner are at two theoretical extremes. Oaklander is a humanist, and Gardner is a psychoanalyst. Nonetheless, with a bit of creativity, their work can be smoothly integrated. The sheer child-like joy of Gardner's games is very effective with resistant clients, while the poetic beauty of Oaklander's fantasy worlds allow children to express themselves lucidly and forcefully even if they have a limited-feeling vocabulary.

While working with abusers requires special training, counsellors can easily learn Gardner's or Oaklander's general methods directly from their books, training programs, or by skilled supervision. The methods are useful in many ways. Hidden information comes out smoothly, and children see the methods as reasonable ways to communicate with the counsellor. Gardner's games and Oaklander's drawings done in a group can be used as family therapy interventions. The methods are easily adapted for adolescents. In Gardner's case, it is only necessary to make the context more contemporary; for example, by pretending to be one's favourite rock group. The author has even seen camp counsellors use similar methods to fill up rainy days or to get campers to sleep.

In all, taking theoretical positions on which therapy is or is not the right one, seems to have outlived its usefulness. It is more valuable to integrate the best practices into one's own eclectic style. The work of Gardner and Oaklander are not well known in the field of counselling, and can make a useful addition to practice.

References

Beutler, L. E. & Crago, M. (1986). Therapist variables in psychotherapy process and outcomes. In S. L. Garfield & A. F. Bergin (eds.), *Handbook of psychotherapy and behavior change* (3rd ed.). New York: Wiley.

Finkelhor, D. (1986). *A Source book on child sexual abuse.* Beverly Hills: Sage.

———. (1987). *Les Nouveaux mythes dans le domaine des agressions sexuelles d'enfants.* National Clearinghouse on Family Violence. Ottawa: Health and Welfare Canada.

Gardner, R. A. (1973). *The Talking, feeling, doing game.* Creskill, N.J.: Creative Therapeutics.

———. (1986). *The Psychotherapeutic techniques of Richard A. Gardner.* Creskill, N.J.: Creative Therapeutics.

Oaklander, V. (1978). *Windows to our children.* Moab, Utah: Real People Press.

Palframan, D. S. (1982). The Discarded adolescent: An overview. *The Psychiatric Journal of the University of Ottawa, 1,* 226-30.

About the Author

Wes Darou, D.Ed., works in the employee counselling service at the Canadian International Development Agency. He has 15 years' experience in counselling, training, and management. His interests include counselling with Native people, career development with women, and organizational counselling.

Address correspondence to: Dr. Wes Darou, c/o Counselling Service, Canadian International Development Agency, 200 Premenade du Portage, Hull, Québec, K1A 0G4.