

Running Head: Wordsmithing

Wordsmithing in counselling?

By Tom Strong, PhD, Associate Professor.

Division of Applied Psychology

Faculty of Education

University of Calgary

2500 University Way Dr. NW

Calgary, Alberta. Canada T2N 1N4

e-mail:strongt@ucalgary.ca

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Abstract

Counselling often involves activities where client and counsellor collaboratively develop a shared language together. This article examines those activities under the colloquial term 'wordsmithing'. Drawing from developments in interpretivist theory, research and counselling, 'wordsmithing' is examined as a relationally responsive conversational practice, one focused on a shared process and outcomes. Specific examples common to counselling are reviewed and suggestions made for improving counsellor participation in wordsmithing activities with clients.

The alphabetized intellect stakes its claim to the earth by *staking it down*.

David Abrams, 1996, p. 267

Some conversational activities better demonstrate the potential accomplishments of socially constructive dialogue than others. Dialogue can take people conceptually, behaviourally, and emotively beyond their present understandings, actions and feelings. Consider the notion of ‘wordsmithing’ where speakers or writers work out a shared language for how they go forward together. An odd coincidence saw me participate in one example of what I am calling wordsmithing, only to later that same day find myself watching another variant of that same activity on a rented videotape. The activity involved crafting a mission statement for the program in which I teach; the video (Berlinger & Sinofsky, 2004) showed the heavy metal rock band, Metallica, doing the same thing with the help of a counsellor. In both cases speakers grappled for words to go forward together in no mere exercise in semantics; career futures and relationships depended on the efforts. Words were used that all involved were sensitive to, as some were taken up, others rebuffed, and new others catalyzed by the inadequacy of some already-used words.

Wordsmithing, as the term implies, points to how words can be used in creative ways not already nailed down in tight prescriptive meanings. In recent social constructionist approaches to therapy (narrative, solution-focused and collaborative language systems), one finds emphasis on constructing and deconstructing therapeutic meaning, with well-scrutinized word use a primary focus. However, such close attention to words and how they are used has been a feature of many other therapies as well (e.g., psychoanalysis, feminist, existential and phenomenological approaches). For Lacan (1968), words can be too full or too empty of meaning. Either way, conversational work is sometimes in order to get words just right. Wordsmithing in this sense invites speakers to make words serve their purposes and not those simply taken up in prior

usages or meanings. Step inside a wordsmithing conversation and listening and speaking take on somewhat improvised dimensions. Part poetics, part wordplay, part editorial critique, and hopefully consensual; wordsmithing, to be meaningful and consequential, affords opportunities to find and shape language to inspire, mobilize and flesh out shared understandings and actions. Sometimes relationally messy (like haggling over words), sometimes playful, wordsmithing creatively and critically engages speakers in constructing processes and outcomes *in and from* their conversations. In trying to work out intentions, understandings, and preferences collaboratively wordsmiths need apt words that suit them (Anderson, 1997; Anscombe, 2000) - a challenge to those wed to particular ideologies, ways of talking, or pre-specified meanings for words. They need (to use a Bakhtin, 1981, term) to “people” their words to suit their shared intentions, understandings and preferences. Wittgenstein (1958) used to say that problems often occurred when people’s use of language had ‘gone on holiday’, and wordsmithing can help put language back on track, but sometimes wordsmithing is a necessary answer to language being too cooped up in the semantic office.

All relationships require some wordsmithing since words are the principal means by which people work out living and being together. Some words end up fossilized or fetishized (Newman & Holzman, 1997) if they are not occasionally revitalized, reflected upon, or updated. Conversation offers lots of opportunities to talk beyond the limitations of a stale, emotionally or conceptually impoverished vocabulary. Talking clearly involves more than information transmission (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980); there one can find embodied, interpretive, moral and micro-political dimensions to talk (e.g., Goffman, 1967; Shotter, 1993). Talk is a key way people develop “common ground” (Clark, 1996) together; however, their conversational interactions can become well-rutted paths of unquestioned meanings and fruitless dialogues.

Wordsmithing?

...a] society (or person) that has no use for poetry will *need* it more than most.

R. Bhaskar, 1989, p. 78

Wordsmithing sounds vaguely like the “alchemy” Jung (1964) used to describe when considering exchanges of symbolic meaning in dialogue, something he regarded as requiring “active imagination”. Getting too literal or concrete about meaning could be seen as the flipside of actively imagining, or wordsmithing, new meanings. While concretely used words can offer a grounded sense of meaning, arguments can thrive on such words, and such words often don’t transplant well to new grounds of physical or social interaction. Some words stigmatize, some simply seem ill-suited for the purposes they’ve been used, and others carry the ‘ghosts’ or moral baggage of usages past. Some words, like rituals, can lose their meaning over time, especially if used as if on ‘automatic pilot’. Modern science has not always helped here either; it can sometimes create a sense that language needs to be emotionally neutered or bereft of imagination (Lacan, 1968) to be appropriate. Sometimes some imaginative word play (or “poetics”) between people is needed to address such examples of what Vico (1984/1744) called “linguistic poverty”.

Depending on one’s view of humans and language, these comments might not fit. Those seeing words as mirrors of nature (Rorty, 1979) see language as something given, to be learned and transmitted as such. But a growing league of hermeneuts, social constructionists, cultural anthropologists, discourse analysts, critical realists, literary theorists, feminists, linguistically-oriented philosophers, constructivists, and a range of interpretivist scholars (e.g., Barthes, 1986; Bhaskar, Gadamer, 1988; Garfinkel, 1967; Geertz, 1973; Gergen, 1999; Hacking, 1999; Haraway, 1991; Heidegger, 1975; Maturana & Varela, 1988; Steiner, 1975) see things differently. From their perspective, people do more than receive and transmit information; they

interpret what they understand, and package what they communicate usually to suit their purposes and relationships (Goodwin, 1995). Language doesn't direct people to communicate and understand each other as if they were ventriloquists' dummies. People *use* language and other ways of communicating (e.g., gestures, tones of voice) to interpret each other as they talk. This gets more complicated given the different interpretive histories they bring to their dialogues. Wordsmithing can be seen when people try to reconcile differences in their interpretive histories and ways of communicating for a language they can co-construct for future shared action.

Narrative thinkers, like Bruner (1990), suggest that people are prone to narrating novelties and anomalies in their experience as familiarities. This extends to how one person's use of word for an experience may not capture the nuances and complexities that relate to another person's use of the same word (Garfinkel, 1967). Accordingly, every attempt to understand someone can be somewhat of an act of interpretation or translation (Gadamer, 1988; Steiner, 1975). This line of thought counters a common sense that suggests words can correctly represent experiences shared in conversation, and that correct use of words ostensibly translates to speakers having had the same experiences. Conflict is a frequent product of this line of thought when translated to actual discussions for how it obscures the differences in meaning I have been describing (e.g., Tannen, 1999). Wordsmiths, as I am describing them, are mindful of speakers' uses of language, are careful to not hear someone else's use of a word as they already understand it, and to see conversation as requiring some interpretive work to arrive at shared understandings.

For wordsmiths, any interpretation is necessarily partial, a linguistic take on how things are or could be, but still incomplete and sometimes uncongenially so as some interpretations crowd out others (Derrida, 1976; Levinas, 1998). Thus, any shared interpretive effort involves other speakers who also have a claim to what is interpreted (Bakhtin, 1984; Billig, 1996). Where

this gets particularly tricky for wordsmiths is in working out shared intentions in words (Anscombe, 2000). Intentions can be like linguistic quicksilver as speakers use words to capture shared preferences or aspiration that are often in flux. Premature conversational foreclosure on any understanding or idea for the future comes with costs that merit further wordsmithing.

Adding to the challenge of wordsmithing is that talk is where and how people work out what matters to them; it helps put to words how they will proceed in potentially shared efforts. They do this as they talk, *co-managing* developments in, and possible directions for, their conversations in what Goffman (1967) termed “face-work”. This requires some improvisational skill as they use their words to accomplish particular outcomes together. Seeing talk as a kind of performance can be traced back to theorists like Austin (1962) or Searle (1998). For them, words can be used to accomplish pre-specified social purposes (e.g., a priest or civic official saying: I now pronounce you husband and wife). For ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984; Sacks, 1995) talk involves other dimensions of performance. In talk people propose, counter, acknowledge and take up understandings, *while* coordinating relationships between them. Much of this occurs in already established relational and cultural routines. But, new developments require speakers to depart from such routines, to find words and ways of talking befitting the new developments, and each other. Such departures seem to require some element of wordsmithing, whether in crafting understandable and agreeable proposals, or responses to them. Often proposal A won't fit, so a proposal B needs improvising on the spot for the speakers to arrive at a collaborative outcome. This kind of wordsmithing requires what Billig (1986) called ‘witcraft’, an ability to use words in artful ways appropriate to the circumstance.

Finally, wordsmithing often requires a different kind of rationality (a ‘think outside the box’ kind) than what guides normal conversations between people. The kind borrowed from the

scientific method and logic often comes up short for everyday conversations (Haraway, 1991; Toulmin, 2001) as many social outcomes are poorly served by such rationality. Many speakers prefer to look within their conversations for “good” wordsmithing and outcomes. In this regard, some of the discursive or narrative-informed approaches to counselling espouse such views of practice with clients (e.g., Anderson, 1997; Freedman & Combs, 1996; Madsen, 1999).

Counselling and wordsmithing

The more uncompromising psychologists became in their exclusive commitment to the requirements of scientific language the more impoverished their descriptions became, at least from the point of view of ordinary usage.

Danziger, 1997, p. 192.

It is hard *not* to think of counselling as involving some elements of wordsmithing since clients and counsellors join in working out understandings, preferred outcomes and the means to enact them. Some see these efforts in counselling as forms of negotiation (Frank, 1987; Gergen, 1999). How such negotiations occur and are experienced in the back-and-forth communications of counselling can be helpful to clients in narrating an enhanced degree of authority over their lives (White & Epston, 1990). However, many counsellors tend to look past conversation for what makes a difference in clients' lives. The counsellor is often seen as someone who guides the conversational process, mapping what she or he is told on to a professional understanding, then using that understanding as the means to formulate a solution. Danziger above raises a red flag for wordsmiths especially at this point. Counsellors are, in my view, often ill-served by their professional discourses in places where wordsmithing can make a difference.

Little emphasis seems given to what some have termed counselling's hermeneutic circle (Anderson, 1997). By that I am referring to how consequential and meaningful things occur as

client and counsellor exchange conversational turns over time (Strong, 2003). With a turn to narrative in counselling has come a focus on stories and cultural discourses, a focus that highlights the up and down-sides what stories or discourses include or exclude in their telling (Paré, 1996). One way of assuming greater authorship, or authority, over one's life is to become more discerning of the language used to narrate that life and where it is heading. Therapists' questions to examine taken-for-granted stories and discourses, and to try on alternatives, invite such authority. How people narrate or co-author stories together, without hijacking each other's meanings or stories is part of the challenge. (exception: Kogan & Gale, 1997). A narrative or discourse focus can be insufficiently interactional, and fails to adequately capture the interpretive management aspects of talk 'on the fly' in contexts like counselling. While important foci to consider, they offer broad-brushed accounts of how people change or understand each other via conversation.

Counselling generally involves the careful coordination of understandings through the use of particular words and ways of speaking. This is particularly the case when starting counselling, when it can be problematic to assume much common ground already exists between client and counsellor in how each uses words as they speak. Some conversation analysts suggest that, at best, speakers can only understand when another speaker is not understanding them (Schegloff, 1991). Translated, that means speakers only have each other's sense of acknowledgement to go on in gauging if they are sharing an understanding. And, such acknowledgements are arguably a speaker's only means of knowing if she or he shares a point of view or intention. How else could speakers infer that they are "on the same page together", if not for the ways they acknowledge each other's word use in what they say or do in response

(Wittgenstein, 1958)? My point in raising such views is to further underscore the care and rigour often required when using language in meaningful conversations, like those of counselling.

Ethnomethodologists have an uncanny knack for making research topics out of what most people take for granted. In the case of counselling, conversation is seldom examined as a research topic unto itself, yet counselling primarily occurs *as* conversation. And, if one looks closely at conversation there is a veritable anthill of consequential activity. The consequences do not occur, just at the end of a conversation either. As the history of process research in counselling shows, as soon as one begins to examine portions of counselling, even smaller portions beckon closer analysis (Greenberg, 1993). The same could be said about the conversations of counselling.

What are the building blocks of talking that facilitate conversational outcomes in counselling? To read most counsellor training textbooks, these are particular skills used by the counsellor – as if the clients on the receiving end of these skills were inert, compliant; or, worse, resistant. For conversation analysts and ethnomethodologists one has to examine outcomes in conversation as dialogic accomplishments; that is, as matters worked out by the parties as they speak. To some extent, each turn at conversation can be seen as jointly managed by the speakers involved (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974), and not as the monologic exercise of power by one speaker over another. Many counsellors have appreciated the collaborative intent articulated by solution-focused and narrative counsellors, like de Shazer (1994), or White and Epston (1990). de Shazer was particularly strong about this, declaring “the death of resistance” in a 1984 article. He felt that while counsellors and clients shared the responsibilities for conversational outcomes, linguistically skilled counsellors could do more to minimize the likelihood that clients were having unwanted conversations.

My point in raising this view of participating in counselling's accomplishments is to highlight what can be gained by adopting a micro-managerial perspective on the conversations I have been calling wordsmithing. Again, I have been describing this as a *co*-management task, one informed by what clients say back to counsellors, and what counsellors then say back to clients based on what the clients have said. Of course, there is an *et cetera* here because what makes counselling a hermeneutic circle is the back-and-forth nature of speakers interpreting then responding to each other in a developmental sequence they contribute to and manage in the course of their conversational exchanges. It is hard to lift out of any conversation a single contribution and declare it as consequential without looking at the rest of the conversational developments. A conversation analytic (CA) frame can help in regarding each conversational turn as occurring across a conversational gap initiated by one speaker but taken up, altered or declined by another. This can be critical to co-managing wordsmithing activities with clients, seeing what they *do* with what is said to them. In the immediacies of wordsmithing one can compromise the process by overlooking this performative aspect of talk, by staying too focused on literal meanings or not registering what others do with their wording.

Before bringing this perspective to specific counselling activities, it can be helpful to return to understanding the social constructionist view of meaning as a matter negotiated between speakers. Wordsmithing generally requires negotiations between speakers. Counselling involves many negotiations as well, including problem-definition, choice of intervention strategies, homework assignments, putting adequate words to insufficiently articulated experiences (like grief, or hazy career futures), or even in bringing sessions to termination. Seldom is counselling seen as an activity where clients render their goals or problems in one language so that counsellors can take over in theirs. There usually is some degree of effort

invested in negotiating a shared language, a language that suits both parties. Wordsmithing involves a kind of negotiation of words and ways of talking as we shall now consider.

Wordsmithing in counselling

We cannot escape words. We can only choose some of them: some of the gates, some of the dances, some of the music.

(Riikonen & Smith, 1997, p. 19)

When does counselling become more than an information exchange? When is it important to talk in ways that creatively combine the words and ways of talking of client and counsellor? These kinds of questions bring me to this paper's last section. For hermeneutic scholars, that people can talk at all in counselling shows some prior wordsmithing has occurred that in turn informs how counsellors currently understand and practice (Cushman, 1995). Depending on one's model of communication (i.e., what one thinks one is doing when talking and listening), wordsmithing opportunities can either abound or seem implausible. Here, I want to examine some specific places where I see some element of wordsmithing as important to counselling.

Constructing Problems and Goals

By definition, clients come to counsellors to resolve problems. The standard approach to problem solving begins with a careful assessment of the problem. However, from an interpretivist position, there are no correct descriptions for things like problems, but there are descriptions that will be more apt or effective than others for the parties involved. Put another way, those holding an interpretivist position see no way to use language to get to 'the bottom of things' because, at best, one can only get more refined descriptions, not the things themselves (deShazer, 1994). This has been one of the more controversial aspects of an interpretivist or

postmodern approach to counselling (e.g., Held, 1995). That humans can effectively use language to make their ways about the world should not be conflated with their having correctly used language. Such notions are best considered in terms of contexts and human use. A prime illustration is shown by the different words ascribed to the same experience that can be found in the world's different languages. Must one of them have things correctly, and others not?

One concern of interpretivists relates to the totalizing or exclusory effects that some terms can have for experience (Levinas, 1998). When looking at problems, totalizing occurs when a problem seemingly only has one meaning; and from that meaning, one corresponding set of corrective actions. Clients often present their concerns in such a fashion. The Mental Research Institute's (MRI) counsellors looked upon problems as being tied to the problem definitions and solutions clients adopted; at issue was how to change either – the problem was the client's definitionally-tied solution the MRI counsellors wrote (Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 1974). Thereafter, "reframing" the problem (redefining it) became a key focus in many family and other forms of counselling. However, clients seldom passively receive such reframes of their difficulties unless these are plausibly presented. More sophisticated approaches to wordsmithing problems and goals developed with the advent of the social constructionist approaches to counselling (e.g., Anderson, 1997; deShazer, 1994; White & Epston, 1990). For example, for solution-focused counsellors, the issue became one of *how* clients articulated what they wanted – in solution, as opposed to problem talk (Furman & Ahola, 1992). Of course, negotiating such a way of talking, without negating clients' initial representations of their plights, is part of the collaborative challenge faced by clients taking up this approach. In narrative approaches to counselling, the thrust is somewhat different; counsellors join with clients' problem presentations. As these are articulated, counsellors invite clients into conversations that re-author

presenting problem stories into stories that fit for clients but have more hope-engendering and resourceful possibilities (Freedman & Combs, 1996; White & Epston, 1990). In collaborative language systems counselling approaches (Anderson, 1997) curiosity is the prime means of examining how some constructions were favoured over others in the ways clients present their difficulties. In each of these cases, clients' presentations of problems to counsellors are seen as ways to construct a problem. At issue is the viability (not the correctness) of those constructions for restoring a sense of client agency and hope.

Consistent with language I used earlier, "constructing problems and goals" more closely approximates a negotiation between counsellor and client on the language used to articulate problems and goals (Buttny, 1996). Many feel such negotiations are invariably tilted in favour of the counsellor for whom there is a power imbalance in terms of culturally conferred roles, linguistic competence, differences in status, and expert knowledge (Guilfoyle, 2003; Proctor, 2002). The 'expert, reality-adjusting' practices of counsellors have been associated with tendencies to maintain a societal status quo through how counsellors define clients' experiences and direct clients accordingly (Rose, 1990). The point worth taking from these critiques relates to the *contestability* of counsellors' definitional practices – especially in areas like defining problems and goals (Strong, 2004). This need not turn such efforts in negotiating problems into a rhetorical arm wrestle over whose definitions will succeed. At the crux of the matter is how the influences and preferences of both clients and counsellors are reflected in conversational processes and outcomes like problem and goal definition. There is an ample literature in both medical and counselling fields regarding overcoming client resistance to professional problem definitions and prescriptions (e.g., Desmond & Copeland, 2000; Meichenbaum, 1987). Authors from both fields counsel professionals to see such communications as involving negotiations that

include the client's perspective. The approach I am suggesting, however, sees problem and goal definition as *resistance-informed* activities where counsellors collaborate with clients to develop understandings and goals consistent with the client's view (Duncan & Miller, 2000).

Notice, in the following passage, how a counsellor and client negotiate a language to keep things moving forward between them:

Exemplar 1: Negotiating an understanding

Line Speaker

- | | | |
|----|------------|---|
| 1 | Counsellor | yea, so part of it was about it being a home base |
| 2 | Client | Uhum |
| 3 | Counsellor | a kind of a constant thing from the past and, and yet there was also a lot of |
| 4 | | future stories being created around this house, so |
| 5 | Client | yea, exactly |
| 6 | Counsellor | old stories and then potential, all kinds of potential and it sounds like the |
| 7 | | kind of stories that you really, they are like preferred stories about your life. |
| 8 | Client | Yea |
| 9 | Counsellor | yea, ones you've collected so, yea |
| 10 | Client | yea. I, I could've really made a go of it, other, I believe I could have found it |
| 11 | | quite personally satisfying, but it also, it would, also represented a loop back |
| 12 | | to - you know - my childhood home. |
| 13 | Counsellor | right |

For most readers, Exemplar 1 would seem like a fairly unremarkable passage of dialogue. To some extent, this relates to my earlier comment about wordsmithing being quite common throughout counselling. What the passage shows is a counsellor and client working out a shared

understanding between them. How this understanding is worked out is what I now want to draw readers attention to, for, in my view, these speakers are engaged in what Goffman (1967) described as face-work as they co-manage this passage of talk. A videotape of this passage shows two actively and collaboratively engaged speakers (i.e., one is not passively receptive while the other has the conversational floor). This is shown somewhat in the transcript above in how responsive – even interruptive or overlapping (as in the client’s interjection on line 5, or overlap on line 10 of the counsellor’s previous talking) – they are as they speak and listen. Looking even closer at how they talked and responded to each other, it becomes evident how much the proceedings rely on each other’s acknowledgments, as turns in talk seemed cued by the “uhum”, “yeahs” and “right”. Speakers may not have a conceptual understanding of what their conversational partner is thinking but they generally regard such acknowledgments as indicating they have adequate understandings for going forward in their dialogues (Strong, in press). If wordsmithing is a preference-driven activity, such preferences in conversation analytic terms should be demonstrable in how speakers manage their turns in talk (Pomerantz, 1984). The passage above shows client and counsellor clearly building on each other’s communications in turns that show how each packages her talk in ways relevant to developing a shared narrative.

How problems and goals are co-articulated between client and counsellor involves conversational work, ‘to get things right’. However, getting things right is about finding a language that fits for both parties. On the one hand, the language needs to fit for the counsellor who needs to work from a problem description that renders a client difficulty solvable (O’Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989). On the other, and more importantly, the language needs to fit for the client – the person for whom the conversation is hosted. The process of negotiating a language that fits for both parties is commonplace in everyday life. In counselling, that process is more

challenging; particularly if clients are socialized to defer to counsellors given their expert knowledge and professional status, or counsellors insist on their language being the correct one for representing clients' experiences and solutions. One way counsellors can assist in downgrading the potentially authoritative sounding quality of what they say is to present ideas and even reformulations in language that is tentative (Davis, 1984). In moves toward democratizing practice, some counsellors invite clients to deconstruct the roles of client and counsellor, to make room for alternatives to culturally stereotyped portrayals and practices of counselling (Parker, 1999). Key to any efforts to engage clients in wordsmithing problem and goal definitions is client awareness that their final editorial say on the processes and outcomes of such conversations is not only invited, but necessary. They will have last say anyway in what they do following counselling.

Customizing Interventions and Homework

As with problem and goal definition, counsellors face a similar wordsmithing challenge in developing client-relevant and helpful interventions in and outside of counselling. The days when counsellors could tell clients, "now here is what you are going to do", because of their presumed expertise, seem to be waning. Increasingly, clients have informed themselves regarding their difficulties by consulting the internet or self-help books (Starker, 2002) and many expect to be included in professional decisions pertaining to their lives. This inclusion goes beyond merely assenting to what the professional suggests or prescribes but often involves active efforts. When it comes to interventions, counsellors want more than compliance; they hope their suggestions inspire clients or motivate them in hopeful ways where pessimism or defeat held sway. Motivation, like intention, can be seen as a linguistically shaped experience, one tied to preferences and mobilization to action (Anscombe, 2000). The linguistic nature of motivation

thus makes it a candidate for wordsmithing. Think of non-clinical conversations that changed your thinking and intentions, how something took place during those conversations for such a shift to occur. From the perspective I have been sharing, wordsmithing is an activity where intentions to do things are worked out, or coordinated in language (Anderson, 1997).

Hypnotherapists such as Flemons (2002) see language as having the power of bringing people and things together, and separating them. The key is in staying together conversationally, within a client's theory of change (Duncan & Miller, 2000), preferences (Freedman & Combs, 1996) or frame of reference (Watzlawick et al, 1974) as new propositions are put forward. Further, by treating all client responses as instructive, as indications of what is still missing from any attempt to customize a solution to fit a client's preferences and circumstances, even missteps can be seen as corrective, on the road to an optimal intervention. Lynn Hoffman (1998) described part of the artistry of social constructionist counselling as involving client-focused language, being "never...more than an inch from the experiences of our clients" (p. 152). Solution-focused counsellors are particularly focused on such nuances of solution construction, incorporating client feedback into a developing solution until some 'do-able next step' in keeping with a client's goals has been collaboratively wordsmithed (DeJong & Berg, 1998; O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989). Typically, this involves eliciting from clients the kinds of details that would articulate a personally appropriate solution, so the kinds of questions asked are a focal part of this aspect of wordsmithing. The key rests in how questions not only ask clients for ideas but also are worded in ways that keep the locus of evaluation (e.g., how do-able, or appropriate) with clients. Here are examples of the kinds of counsellor questions I mean:

- a) What does a do-able next step regarding your concern need to involve for you?
- b) What would tell you that you are starting to address your concern? Could you do 'that'?

- c) Are there times in your past when you were able to address a concern like the one we are discussing? What did you do then that might be useful to do now?

Of course, the wordsmithing does not stop with asking such questions, often there can be fairly involved conversations as potential solutions are “talked into being” or significance (Heritage, 1984). Such negotiations only begin with a question, seeing them through to client-endorsed interventions or homework assignments that are largely of their own making is the goal.

Putting words to the ineffable

The toleration of ambiguity can be productive if it is taken not as a warrant for sloppy thinking but as an invitation to deal responsibly with issues of great complexity.

Levine, 1985, p. 17

The inadequacies of language often become apparent when people experience powerful emotions or yearnings. How can one capture in words an experience as complicated as the loss of a lover, a chronic illness, or feelings of spiritual turmoil? Dare one try to do this with a single totalizing term or story when the complexities could be so reduced to fit the term or story as to leave out matters of great personal significance? For some psychoanalysts, like Lacan (1968), language is a means to restoring emotional mastery and personal agency over experiences that otherwise overwhelm us. Other psychoanalysts depicted such linguistic difficulties as “alexithymia”, a construct implying that people develop disorders in articulating their affective experiences, a construct of dubious merit for those seeing such articulation difficulties in cultural or relational terms (Kirmayer, 1987). Counselling, arguably, is a practice whereby clients acquire a language that helps them address their concerns and goals. It is how they do this in ways that engage clients as authors and editors of their linguistically understood experience that I have been circling around with my term, wordsmithing.

For John Shotter and Arlene Katz (1999) there are many places in helping conversations where one can find unvoiced possibilities ripe for dialogue. Clients' words often are underscored or emphasized in ways that show traces of experiences that remain emotionally incomplete or insufficiently acknowledged by others. It is how counsellors orient to such client utterances and then join clients in talking them to fuller articulation that is the wordsmithing challenge.

Silverman (2001) wrote of there often being a counselling challenge in how to construct or describe "delicate objects", in collaboratively putting words to morally charged topics. In some respects, wordless or inarticulate moments carry with them vulnerabilities for speakers. They are generally more comfortable having something clear and concrete to say or hear. But, both wordlessness and certainty can be problems in relationships. For some counsellors, the answer is to create conversational contexts where both certainties and ambiguities are welcomed, often with an ear to later wordsmithing (Byrne & McCarthy, 1988). While my focus in this section shall primarily focus on putting words to the ineffable or ambiguous (where clients want that), it is also important to consider the helpful potentials of deconstructive conversations when certainties of understanding close down possibilities for future dialogue or action (Amundson, Stewart & Valentine, 1993). This, of course, can apply to counsellors as much as clients.

The ineffable comes in many inadequately articulated forms. Remember, it was Vico (1686/1744) who said we need poetic logic whenever words come up short for us. There are many such places where people struggle to find words for their experience. Where this matters most to clients is in describing their concerns and how to address them. To some extent counsellors are conversational midwives when helping clients wordsmith the formerly inchoate. Sometimes this is because a dearth of words is available to clients and grappling to find words that fit for them is about harnessing curiosities to shared word harvesting activities. At other

times, however, clients find themselves in morally or politically charged “unspeakable dilemmas” (Griffiths & Griffiths, 1994) where the potential consequences of speaking can seem overwhelming or too negative. Such might be the case, for example, in helping one spouse wordsmith an apology to a spouse for whom forgiveness may be equally difficult to articulate. Regardless, in all cases, the ineffable can seem paralyzingly ponderous for clients stuck for words. Recognizing and inviting such moments to talk about the difficult to articulate is clearly as much a relational activity as it is a semantic one.

Attributes of a wordsmith

Language is a play with words until they can impersonate physical objects and abstract ideas.

Ackerman, 1999. p. 4

Wordsmithing is not for everyone. As Ackerman suggested above, the use of language can be quite constructively playful, something particularly important when words have underdetermined or overdetermined meanings (Gadamer, 1988; Newman & Holzman, 1997). The wordsmithing counsellor is someone at home in varieties and nuances of language, and their inadequacies. More importantly, wordsmithing requires some comfort for engaging in improvisational activities (Nachmanovitch, 1990) where language is ‘played’ with in spontaneous ways that suit both client and counsellor. For Vygotsky (1978), people acquire their thinking first through dialogic interaction with others. As this relates to wordsmithing, clients may acquire not only words to add to their thinking but ways of extending the conversational activities of wordsmithing to how they think and act about things (Billig, 1996). For counsellors, however, this often translates into having to engage with clients’ words and ways of talking in new processes and words customized on the fly.

Part of the linguistic nimbleness wordsmithing requires can be facilitated by a discursive view of practice (Strong, 2002). This entails seeing the meanings or representational aspects of language as situated in ways particular to cultural traditions, without holding the conversation to some ‘correct’ version particular to the counsellor’s discourse. At issue, is the fit and effectiveness of the languages used by clients without counsellors having to adjudicate them ‘for’ clients who are the ones who must make use of any clinically developed language. The counsellor wordsmith can benefit from occasionally being Rorty’s (1989) “ironist”, someone comfortable with stepping out of any language’s common sense for less certainty and more creativity that may seem initially at odds with that common sense. Literal or concrete mindedness can be an example of what some hypnotherapists term “hypermnnesia” (Edgette & Edgette, 1995), a vivid fixation or absorption in particular understandings to the rigid exclusion of viable others. To some extent, the principle I am relating here is one that says, if a language works for people, then why tamper with it; however, when language may be overdetermined, it may be time to consider wordsmithing a more viable vocabulary for clients’ concerns.

Wordsmithing counsellors are at home in the metaphoric possibilities language affords (Riikonen & Smith, 1997) – when descriptions seem prohibitively concrete, they can stand back from words used and consider not only their aptness (as this relates to clients’ goals and concerns), but alternatives that might equally suit clients.

Curiosity is another of the wordsmithing counsellor’s most valued attributes, for how its use “performs” in counselling. To some extent it can help to practice from a gentle, yet receptive, incredulity that asks, “how, out of all the ways that this concern could be understood, did *this* understanding come to hold sway?” This stance can tie into what Anderson (1997) described as welcoming the “not-yet-said”, as often singular understandings have crowded out other

understandings that could also be wordsmithed into relevance or significance. At the same time, I am reminded of two phrases about the need to welcome what clients say from Postmodern Therapies website and listserv manager, Lois Shawver (n.d.): a) that counsellors often need to listen “generously”, and b) that sometimes counsellors need to package their “talk in order to listen”. Consistent with the performative view of talking held by conversation analysts (Heritage, 1984; Sacks, 1995), wordsmithing counsellors are acutely sensitive to how their talk is received, in what clients *do* with a counsellor’s responses, questions or initiatives, and what they, in turn, do with what clients did with their previous utterances. This involves a micro-dynamic consideration of, and participation in, counselling’s hermeneutic circle. One good example of this relates to the intentions and reactions involved when counsellors ask questions of clients. To what extent do counsellors’ questions are used out of sincere curiosity, out of an intention to strategically pose ideas to clients, out of an information-gathering sequence that is professionally sanctioned, and so on (Tomm, 1988)? And, what do clients do with such questions?

Finally, it can help to return to the mission statement conversations I referred to at the outset, for it is in the midst of such conversations that the emotional and moral stakes of wordsmithing become clearer. Participating in, or facilitating, such conversations can bring with them a fraught and high-wire sense of gravity as semantic mis-steps or misunderstandings can seemingly hang on every word. Wordsmithing implies some measure of negotiation where the key is in finding language that satisfies the parties involved in moving forward together (Wittgenstein, 1958). Finding that language together, however, can be a daunting task.

Constraints on wordsmithing

The transformation of learning into education paralyzes man's poetic abilities, his power to endow the world with his (sic) personal meaning...The corruption of the balance of learning makes people into puppets of their own tools.

Illich, 1973, p. 65.

Wordsmithing typically takes place in already made contexts of understanding, where certain words and ways of talking comprise the "common sense" people share in different cultural contexts (Garfinkel, 1967). For Foucault (1972), such contextualized forms of common sense translated to "truth regimes" where linguistic transgressions (deviations from normal understanding and conversational practice) were policed by those upholding such regimes. The disciplinary languages of psychology and mental health are a good example, but so too are the languages clients present as their truths. In an increasingly multicultural world, it becomes increasingly difficult to hold others to any discourse as the correct way of talking and understanding, particularly if this requires one's conversational partners to discard the discourses by which they relate to the world and others within it. Wordsmithing, in this regard, can be somewhat subversive, as its processes and outcomes typically require cross-cultural dialogues where speakers are challenged to talk and listen in new ways (Kogler, 1996). But, wordsmithing does not take place in a cultural vacuum either. While client and counsellor might try on new words and ways of talking, for the client there remains an issue of how viable any new words and ways of talking are beyond the consulting room.

Sometimes wordsmithing is a hard activity in which to engage clients. This can be the case when traditions or ideologies have a particular hold on how clients talk and understand. Dogma and wordsmithing seem incompatible. So, too, is fear of repercussions should one talk in new ways that would be ill-received where clients share lives with those most important to them.

For example, clients who learn to say difficult things in a counsellor's office might find saying those things impossible to tell the people for whom they are intended. Typically, clients make such difficulties evident (in what Goffman, 1967 described as "face-work"), when exercising their editorial veto on attempts to wordsmith outcomes that aren't fitting for them, but double-checking on the client's sense of viability for such outcomes can help. Wordsmithing also requires a degree of linguistic competence that not all clients or counsellors share or prefer. Finally, wordsmithing is at odds with increasing efforts to manualize practice in counselling in particular diagnostic and intervention protocols that require conversational outcomes tied to professional discourse.

Conclusion

In this article I depicted significant aspects of the conversational work of counselling as "wordsmithing". Wordsmithing is an interpretive activity where clients and counsellors creatively use and negotiate language to address circumstances where words have come up short for clients. I discussed the potential usefulness of wordsmithing in relation to addressing the circumstances of constructing problems and goals, customizing interventions, and putting words to ineffable human experiences. I closed by outlining some attributes of a good wordsmith along with considerations of constraints on wordsmithing.

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