

An extra language in counselling and training

Marleen Diekmann Schoemaker & Guus van der Veer

During our work as counsellors for refugees and trainers of counsellors in areas of armed conflict, we have met with many language and communication problems. Interpreters can help in dealing with these problems, but in addition to that we learned to use little plastic dolls as an extra medium in working with people from different cultural backgrounds. In this article we describe the use of these dolls.

Keywords: armed conflict, dolls (as tools in counselling and training), inner child, inner dialogue

Making problems visible

In western countries, most people live in small nuclear families. When a client tells about her/his family background, the number of persons mentioned is usually small. In many southern countries things are different. A story about a personal problem may feature the names of numerous relatives, and the counsellor may easily lose her/his overview. Drawing diagrams may help to visualise the person involved, coins and buttons can also be used, but we learned to work with little plastic dolls (Duplo or Lego). These dolls come in various sorts: children, adults, male and female, with different coloured hair (grey for grandparents) and skin colour. This makes it easy to represent the whole family, their neighbours, or nobody else who plays an important part in client's life. Even a dead person may be depicted: by laying a doll on its back. The physical separation of family members living as refugees in another place can be symbolized by a visual barrier like a marker. Each complaint or a symptom mentioned by client can be represented by a button, her/his personal resources can be shown as the content of a little treasure box, an alcohol problem can be symbolized by a little bottle, a dowry problem by some coins, and war violence or aggression by a cardboard figure showing the silhouette of a man with a club.

Making the problem of a client visual helps both the counsellor and the client to get an accurate overview; not only of the people involved, but also of the way the client feels that they interact. A person the client experiences as domineering can be represented by a doll standing on a building block. An angry person is pictured by a doll with raised arms, a dysfunctional or a submissive person by a sitting doll. Two dolls with their

backs towards each other depict that the client feels there is no communication between two persons. A doll with its head turned refers to someone living more in the past than in the present, and so on.

Putting the dolls on the table while the client tells her/his story makes it possible for the client to look at her/his problems from a different angle. It can help the counsellor to recognise information that is lacking as yet, but essential for the complete understanding of the client's problem: a doll representing the father may be absent, for example. Resources that are available to the client can be identified, and those not yet on the table can be added to the scene. The client may even use the dolls to show how she/he would like her/his life to be changed.

The psychological consequences of the armed conflict

Personal problems caused by traumatic experiences or uprooting can easily be visualised.

For example: *Suresh was suffering from nightmares about the torture he went through when he was detained in a police station. He was represented by two dolls: an 'adult'-doll representing his adult, rational thinking part, and a 'child'-doll. The counsellor pointed to his adult part and said: 'This one wants to forget what happened at the police station, he wants to go back to school and sit for the a-level exam and pass with good marks. But this little one cannot forget so easily, he feels totally helpless and alone and frightened when it gets dark... Maybe this one (pointing to the adult doll) can help the little one – how can we help a little child that is a part of you, that is so frightened after all the terrible things that happened?*

Or, during an explanation of bereavement processes to a group of starting counsellors, the trainer puts four audio cassette boxes on the table, representing four stages in the process of bereavement. The first box shows a woman during the day that her house was shelled. The doll representing her has both hands in the air. In front of the cassette box, a baby doll and a male doll, both on their backs, depict her baby and her husband who died in the attack. A doll with grey hair, representing her mother-in-law, and three small dolls, representing her surviving children, stand to one side. The scene

illustrates the phase of 'crying' out, immediately after the traumatic experience (cf. Krystal, 1984).

Then the trainer moved the doll representing the client to the next box, her face turned away from the previous scene, in a sitting position, arms down, to symbolize denial, trying not to feel, numbness, depression. The trainer adds a small doll representing the woman's inner feelings. This doll is looking at the scene, symbolizing intrusive memories and nightmares. The trainer puts the surviving children closer to her mother-in-law. He adds a doll who represents a neighbour and asks the participants: *'What would this lady say?'* The participants have some ideas: *'you should go on with your life, be happy with the children who are still alive, you should take good care of them instead of leaving them to your mother-in-law. Get over your sadness, you make yourself more miserable.'* The trainer then discusses with a group how a counsellor could react in a more empathetic way.

After that discussion, the trainer moves the dolls representing the woman to the next box. This box symbolizes the stage in which she's able to experience the mixture of feelings related to her grief – sadness, pain, anger, guilt – without these feelings becoming overwhelming.

The fourth box is directly adjoining the third one. The dolls representing the woman are standing up right again when the trainer puts her there. She looks at the future, but she can also see what happened in the past. This fourth box represents the integration of her losses in a new perspective.

Making the inner dialogue of the client visible

The client herself/himself can be pictured by using two dolls: an 'adult'-doll representing her/his adult, rational thinking part, and a 'child'-doll. This child-doll represents her/his primary, emotional reactions. These reactions, the counsellor explains, are based on her/his individual life experience from early childhood on, especially in relationships with important others such as parents, grandparents, siblings, teachers, etc. The counsellor refers to this part of the personality as *the inner child* (cf. Missildine, 1963).

Through the dolls, counsellor and client can explore how the client relates to this part of herself/himself. Often it becomes clear that the client reacts to her/his inner child in a way reflecting the attitude of her/his parents when she/he actually was a child; for every

human being has strong loyalties to her/his parents and family (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973). So we may see for example that a client is somewhat negligent, punitive, coercive, or overindulgent in her/his way of dealing with herself/himself, just as her/his parents used to be.

By using two dolls, we can find out how the client talks with herself/himself. We can also stimulate the client to look and talk to her/his inner child in a way that is more tolerant – without disowning her/his parents; not giving up her/his loyalties to parents and family, but giving these loyalties a new place.

The inner dialogue of the counsellor

In the same way, a supervisor or trainer can visualize the inner dialogue of a counsellor by representing her/him by two dolls: one for the adult part with all her/his knowledge and skills for professional counselling and counsellor's inner child. The inner child determines to a large extent how the counsellor feels about the client, and may cause her/him to jump to conclusions about her/him, to offer unnecessary advice, to stop listening, to become judgemental and so on. Stimulated by the supervisor or trainer, the counsellor can try to become better acquainted with her/his inner child, so that she/he can use her/his own emotional reactions as an additional source of information about the problems of the client instead of inadvertently acting them out.

During the training of volunteers who wanted to work as counsellors in refugee camps, the participants did a role-play. The client was a woman of 24 who had been recently married to a man ten years older. The marriage had been arranged by their parents. After the ceremony it turned out that her husband did not want sexual contact. According to the client he had given the following explanation: some years ago he had fallen in love with a girl. Due to war violence and displacement he had lost contact with her. He had searched for information about her whereabouts, but without success. She could be in the occupied territory, or in the capital, or in a Western country, or dead. But he felt loyal to her, and felt he would betray her if he made love to his wife.

The participants playing the role of the counsellor immediately started to give advice to the client. She should put effort in to making herself attractive. Maybe she could find out what her 'rival' looked like and then copy her style of dressing.

At that point the trainer stopped the role-play, and made the problem visible on the table using dolls, including two dolls for the counsellor. He asked the group: was the counsellor neutral or not neutral with regard to this problem. All members agreed she had

been neutral.

Then the trainer asked the counsellor about her parents 'when (pointing at the doll representing her inner child) this one was a real child, how did her parents relate to each other? Was it like this (he puts the mother doll on a block, the father doll is sitting lower on the table), or like this (he puts the father doll on two blocks, and the mother doll standing) or still different?' The counsellor put the mother doll on the table and the father doll on one block higher saying that her mother always felt it was her duty to please her husband.

Then the trainer put a different doll on the table, representing a different counsellor, with her inner child. He also put her past on the table: a doll representing her father on the floor with a bottle symbolizing that he was alcoholic, a doll representing her mother standing upright on a block. 'The mother of this counsellor kicked her husband out when he refused to stop drinking', the trainer added. 'Would this counsellor advise the client to put more effort

into pleasing her husband? Or would she think that the husband has a problem that interferes with the marriage and that he should put more effort into overcoming this problem?

The participants understood that the advice given during the role-play was in part determined by the personal background of the counsellor.

At first the trainer of counsellors may feel a bit silly playing with these dolls. But through exercise and experience, using the dolls can become a powerful tool. This tool can help to explain the ideas behind difficult concepts such as counter-transference and projective identification without even mentioning these terms; in a way that helps the client or trainees involved to understand better and react less impulsively to what goes in their minds.

References:

- Boszormenyi, I. & Spark, G. M. (1973). *Invisible loyalties*. New York, Harper & Row.
- Diekmann Schoemaker, M. (2001). Een taal erbij. Phaxx, Vol 9, (12), p. 5-8.
- Krystal, H. (1984). Psychoanalytic views on human emotional damage. In: Van der Kolk, B. A. (ed.), *Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: Psychological and Biological Sequelae*, Washington D. C., American Psychiatric Press, pp. 2-28.
- Missildine, W. H. (1963). *Your inner child of the past*. New York, Simon & Schuster.

Marleen Diekmann Schoemaker, transcultural psychotherapist introduced and developed the techniques described in this article (Diekmann Schoemaker, 2001). She works in private practice in Amsterdam and as Mental Health Consultant for Medecins sans Frontieres Holland.

Guus van der Veer, transcultural psychoterapist, mental health consultant, works at the Sinai Centre in Amsterdam and is scientific advisor of War Trauma Foundation. Author's address: Cornelis Schuytstraat 17-2e, 1071 JD Amsterdam, The Netherlands, e-mail: guusvanderveer@freeler.nl