

Gloria revisited

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Mike Trier reports what he learned from being a client with seven different therapists.

Remember Gloria Szymanski? Her full name is rarely used. She was the young woman who agreed to be filmed being counselled by Carl Rogers, Fritz Perls and Albert Ellis – the three leading proponents of person-centred (Rogers), Gestalt (Perls) and rational emotive behaviour therapy (Ellis) through the 1950s and 1960s. The films, *Three Approaches to Psychotherapy I, II and III*, were produced and directed by California psychologist and psychotherapist Everett L. Shostrom in 1964 and released in 1965.¹

Thousands of counselling students will have seen these films, which were used worldwide as training aides in counselling courses. And, while they are very dated, and the subject of controversy as to the ethics and the impact on Gloria herself,² I still find it fascinating to see how differently she presents with and responds to each counsellor.

Inspired by Gloria, I teamed up in 2016 with the online training organisation Online Events to recreate the Gloria films. I took on her role myself and was filmed being counselled by seven different therapists, each from a different modality. The aim was to allow the counsellors to showcase how they worked and how this exemplified their philosophies and modalities. I brought the same presenting issue to each: my struggles with the decision to downsize to a smaller house and the way my head and heart seemed to be pulling in opposite directions.

The format was identical for all the sessions: 20 minutes of counselling, followed by a 20-minute discussion between the therapist and John Wilson, a person-centred trainer and the director of Online Events, who chaired the sessions, and then a further 10 minutes for chat-room participants to put questions to me about my experiences and to the therapist about theirs. The sessions were all broadcast live.

The therapists

1. Elaine Davies, cognitive behavioural (CBT), 26 June 2016.

2. John Bradley, person-centred, 27 June 2016.

3. John Rowan, humanistic, existential, authentic, relational, transpersonal (HEART), 28 June 2016.
4. John Threadgold, focusing-oriented, 4 July 2016.
5. Peter Lindsay, psychodynamic and systemic, 2 October 2016.
6. Margaret Rosemary, Gestalt, 16 October 2016.
7. Sarah Morley, psychodrama, 4 December 2016.

You can download all seven sessions from the [Online Events website](#)

Lead or follow?

Three findings stand out for me as important. First, each counsellor began the session quite differently; second, subsequent study of the session transcripts shows that how the sessions developed was dictated by what was set up in those first few minutes; third, the major difference between the counsellors was whether they led or followed me, the client. The therapists' choices in the first few minutes thus influenced the course of the rest of the session. This persuades me that a closer scrutiny of those vital early minutes will help me improve my counselling and, I hope, help other counsellors do the same.

As 'Gloria', I noticed that I was more aware of the specific interventions that the counsellors made than of their official 'modalities'. Most counsellors lead at the beginning of sessions, particularly with new clients. This is particularly true when they are explaining how counselling works, conducting an assessment and starting to establish a connection with the client.³ The process of establishing rapport was not shown during the filmed sessions: because we only had 20 minutes, the participating therapist and I contacted each other first by email and then by at least one Skype session, well before we took part in the Online Event. So, with such experienced counsellors, rapport was always established before the session started. **But there was one particular session that did stand out for me in terms of connecting, and that was during the beginning of Sarah Morley's (psychodrama) session:**

SM: This issue that you're taking round to all these different therapists...

MT: Right.

SM: Do you want to start by just telling me a bit more about it?

MT: OK that would be helpful. The issue is about downsizing. We've got quite a big house and we feel we should sell it. But when it comes down to it, it feels like head and heart are in opposition. There are lots of

rational, logical reasons that say 'Yes, we should sell it'. And we've had a two-year plan. So, the plan was that at Easter we'd put it on the market, at Easter just gone. But, when it came down to it, we just didn't feel like doing it.

SM: Right, OK, so that's the head and heart [...]

SM: Now you can take on a position if you want to. Really what I want you to do is speak from your instinct. So, you are Mike's house.

MT: OK, yes.

SM: And tell me something about what you feel like, what kind of house are you, are you like spooky?

MT: No, I think I'm very friendly and I think I'm very holding and supportive. Mike and his family have been there for 25 years-odd, and so I've watched them develop.

SM: My goodness, you've watched Mike and his family for 25 years?

MT: Yes.

SM: And you've been holding them?

MT: Exactly.

SM: I'm actually very moved and I can see you are too.

MT: Yeah.

SM: You are, yeah, you're a very warm house.

In that moment, I suddenly felt overwhelmed by strong feelings and really wanted to back off. There was a brief moment when time was suspended; there was just a pure connection between the two of us. Sarah realised that talking about the house in that way had triggered a moment of extreme vulnerability for me that was unbearable. She helped me back away from these feelings. We perhaps experienced a moment of 'relational depth'.

Power dynamic

Next, I want to discuss the power dynamic that the counsellor sets up with the client in the first few minutes. This, in my opinion and from my experience, both as a client and as a therapist, can really determine the effectiveness of the counselling that follows. One of the main factors that influences the power

dynamic is whether the counsellor leads or follows the client (an exploration of which is more effective is beyond the scope of this article). The transcripts show four different aspects: generally, whether counsellors lead or follow; whether the counsellor works within the client's or their own frame of reference; if they lead the client into thinking about the past or the future, and if they prioritise feelings, thoughts or actions.

The extracts below from the transcripts illustrate these issues. John Bradley (person-centred) seemed mainly to follow, and to stay with my frame of reference:

MT: I've been building up to this, a lot of tension about it, imagining all sorts of futures. Now that we've delayed doing it, there is such a sense of relief, I just couldn't believe it.

JB: Such a sense of relief from the tension in your stomach as well as the huge tension that you were feeling about moving, and then when it came to Easter, this huge relief that we didn't have to do this?

MT: Absolutely, it's just the tension has completely gone. I think I realise I've been with tension for about two years. We've had a plan to put the house on the market and getting all the decoration and work done for two years now and then building up to Easter – right, we're going to go, we're going to sort of pull the switch, and then we didn't.

JB: So, you were building up for over two years, you were going to go at Easter, pull the switch and then it didn't happen.

MT: It didn't happen, exactly, yes, because there's my partner and my son all living together and I think all of us, actually none of us wanted to leave, so a tremendous sense of relief. I mean, the logic is probably thinking 'What's going on here?' but the feelings are thinking 'Fantastic'!

JB: So, this feeling you've said is about the sense of relief and this great anticipation for over two years as well, this is going to happen and then actually when the time came it didn't happen.

Most of the other counsellors did lead, at least some of the time. For example, Elaine Davies (CBT):

ED: OK, well, 20 minutes – let's imagine the 20 minutes have gone and it's coming up to half past seven – what's the best you'd like to get out of these 20 minutes?

This highlights a dilemma for me: is it helpful to ask clients if they have any thoughts about what they want to cover in the session, even if that means that

I take the lead at the beginning of the session? Sometimes I believe that it can be useful, as it can help the clients focus. Likewise, John Rowan (HEART):

JR: Well, I was in on your previous discussions and sessions and one thing that struck me as rather strange was that nobody ever mentioned the past.

Here John was leading, but he specifically wanted to do something different from the other counsellors. It jarred a bit, but it also helped me off the tramlines and into new territory, which proved helpful. I'll talk more below about taking the client to the past.

Head and heart

Margaret Rosemary (Gestalt) challenged my opposition between head and heart, reframing how I presented my central issue but doing it from her framework rather than mine:

MT: So, there was an opposition between what I'm calling head and heart.

MR: Well, what I'm noticing is not your head or your heart but your toes.

MT: OK.

MR: Your toes were very active while you were talking. Where do you feel your own energy as you talk about downsizing?

MT: [Pause] It's difficult. I think my toes are responding to being a bit nervous so I'm not sure. I'm aware of my toes going, so energy going to my toes. I don't know what that means actually.

MR: OK, well, how about moving your toes about a bit?

John Threadgold (focusing-oriented therapy) started by coming into my framework to check that he'd understood what I was bringing. Then he offered a plan of action, which included me bringing my awareness to my body. His aim was to facilitate me to explore my own frame of reference though getting a body-felt sense of the issues. I'd get a better sense of the intricacies of my own frame of reference by bringing in my body's take on my thoughts, feelings, emotions and the energies that lay underneath the surface decision about moving home.

JT: And I've also heard that for you there's a conflict between your thoughts and the feelings, and that they've been sort of warring against each other. Is that right?

MT: Yes. I think warring is slightly overstated but it's something in that direction. They're certainly opposed. I wouldn't think they think of each other as enemies.

JT: No.

MT: So, it's like a disagreement among friends rather than open warfare.

JT: Yes, so I overstated that a bit. But there's a sense of a disagreement between friends almost, it's like there's a conflict there.

MT: There is a conflict, yes.

JT: Now, maybe if I could suggest a little plan for working with that conflict. I mean, so what I'm suggesting, and this is only one way of doing focusing-oriented therapy, is that we perhaps do a little grounding and anchoring together, just to get a sense of the chair and the floor supporting you.

MT: OK.

JT: And then, when you're ready to go further, if you could then, I might just float a question, like, I'm wondering if you can sense the conflict right now and maybe, the idea is just to step back and be with those conflicting thoughts, not to take sides but to be with them and to explore them and to allow each to have a voice. Does that sound OK?

MT: Yes, that sounds really good, yeah.

JT: And also, normally, when we get nearer the end, I'm wondering if it's still, you know, quite a conflict in there. It might be worth, and I'll happily suggest that maybe saying perhaps a silent promise to return, or perhaps to thank your body for what it's showing you.

MT: Yeah, yes, it makes sense.

Past and present

Another question that I'm interested in is how therapists start helping the client to process the issues that they bring. For example, are they present centred, are they interested in the client's past history, or is making changes in the near future the main priority?

Two therapists were interested in whether I had experienced anything similar in the past. As noted above, one was John Rowan:

JR: I wonder if you'd ever had this kind of situation before in your life. When was the last time you had a decision like this to make?

MT: Actually, that's interesting. It was about 1991, because we wanted to move out to Derbyshire because one of my sons was to attend a special school and he would have had to board, but we didn't really want that; we preferred him to be a day student, but that would have meant us uprooting from London where we were all established and moving to Derbyshire and I think you're right, actually, I think that this new move has definitely got echoes of that move.

JR: Now, what struck you about that move? I mean, it seems to have gone alright in the end, but what was it like when it was happening?

Peter Lindsay (psychodynamic and systemic) also asked about the past:

PL: So, have you had in the past, if you think back to your childhood and the way you were brought up, have you had other issues that have been equally difficult for you to resolve emotionally versus logically?

MT: Well, it's interesting. I went to boarding school and you asking me that question has immediately thrown up an old memory, which I'd rather buried. I was at boarding school, but three times a term we'd go home on a Sunday for the day. We went via the tube and then my parents would take us back. I just felt absolutely terrible on the way back. It wasn't really sort of logical at all, and it almost negated going home, which I liked. But the feelings of having to leave, to make this change, leave home and go back to boarding school were just horrible and I'm wondering whether there's possibly a link there.

It rarely occurs to me to ask about clients' pasts – I usually like to be present centred. But I now think I do need to reconsider the potential value of this sometimes. I would still want to consider the timing of this, and try to judge when it might suit the client, and preferably involve them in the decision.

There is a power dynamic dimension to this. I, as the client, presented an issue in the present. Both John and Peter asked me to leave the issue formulated in the present and consider linked events from the past. These are examples of therapists leading from their own framework, rather than following me and staying with my framework.

Finding a balance

The final therapist choice that I'm wanting to explore is the balance between feelings, thoughts and actions when working with clients. The therapists operated quite differently with respect to this.

As can be seen from the extract of his transcript above, John Bradley stayed with my feelings the whole time. Elaine Davies initiated a discussion with me to devise a plan for the session. She took me to the realm of thoughts:

ED: OK, and I'm going to push you just a tad more. So, in the 20 minutes, when you think about that move, when you think about that inner tension, when half past seven comes, is there anything particular that you'd like to be going away with?

MT: As I say, I think it would be good to talk out loud about it, as opposed to it going round in my head.

ED: OK, so that's a great goal, isn't it. Rather than it being in your head, to verbalise it with me.

MT: Yeah.

ED: And when I'm listening, I'd be listening out for some thoughts, feelings and even some behaviours, and can I feed that back to you?

MT: Absolutely, yes, that would be helpful.

These are just snapshots, demonstrating how therapists can help clients process feelings and thoughts and suggest actions. Reflecting on my own practice, at different times I focus on clients' feelings, thoughts and behaviours and help facilitate change. But I also strike a balance between these in a way that is particular to me, and seemingly different from these seven therapists.

I often find myself saying to clients: 'We are an action-oriented society, and we also think a lot; my experience is that feelings often get left out.'

In my current practice, I have in my mind a sequence:

- **Stage 1:** allow clients to express and offload their feelings.
- **Stage 2:** help them make sense of their experiences.
- **Stage 3:** help them plan change.

This is not a strict sequence, and not all stages are included with every client. But it does help me make sense of my work.

I invite readers to look again at the balance between leading and following clients within their own practice. When I examine my own practice, I realise that this balance does vary. When I work one-to-one, I am much more likely to follow; with couples, I'm more likely to lead. I hope that I achieve this balance collaboratively with the clients.

Going back to the original Gloria films, I note that Carl Rogers followed and stayed with Gloria's framework, while Fritz Perls and Albert Ellis both seemed to lead and operated largely from their own frameworks.

Gillian Proctor, in *The Dynamics of Power*, talks about three aspects of power: 'power over', 'power with' and 'power within'.⁴ The aim of therapy is to boost clients' 'power within', presumably by striking an appropriate balance between 'power over' and 'power with', in a similar way that I am seeking a helpful balance between leading and following.

Research is possibly needed to determine the relative efficacy of leading and following, particularly as there is an assumption in all forms of manualised counselling (which are prioritised in the NHS) that leading is more effective, gets results quicker and is thus better value for money.

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References

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