The Anonymous Befrienders: Volunteers in a Telephone Crisis Intervention Centre

By John M. Gandy

INTRODUCTION

Volunteers have played a very important role in the development of suicide prevention and crisis intervention centres in Canada and throughout the world.[1] Over the years the centres have moved from the rather narrow goal of suicide prevention to a service that responds to persons seeking help with personal problems ranging from loneliness to threatening suicide with the result that today most centres respond to calls for help not only in times of crisis but also provide support over extended periods for persons experiencing distress. While no one model is characteristic of the majority of the centres, the philosophy of the Samaritans, an international organization with its headquarters in England, have been very influential in shaping the approach to helping used by many centres. The following are among the tenets central to the Samaritan philosophy of helping through "befriending": (1) Help is provided by volunteers on a 24-hour basis; (2) The person seeking help is free to reject the help offered; and (3) Volunteers are carefully selected and trained for their role as helpers.[2]

The role of "befriender" is seen as a demanding one, particularly in a setting in which all contracts between the "befriender" and "befriended" are by telephone and there is a reciprocal anonymity in the relationship. The research reported in this paper[3] examines the characteristics of the volunteer providing the service in a telephone crisis intervention centre in a metropolitan area in Canada and the volunteers' perception of their role as "befriender" and the differential responses to the demands of the role. We also look at some ways in which the telephone determines the social reality of the interaction between the "befriender" and "befriended."

It is important to note at the outset that the rapid growth of crisis intervention centres in large urban areas of Canada and the United States resulted from several different but interrelated developments which may be summarized as follows: (1) The realization that alienation and isolation are major problems among urban residents who lack the familial and institutional supports to deal with these problems; (2) A recognition that disintergration of primary group and institutional supports have resulted in the need for an organization to assist persons in coping with crisis and stress; (3) The feeling of a substantial proportion of the public that helping agencies staffed by professionals are inflexible and unresponsive to requests for help; and (4) The interest of volunteers in developing services and programs that are useful but not in direct competition with those programs staffed by professionals.

THE CONCEPT OF "BEFRIENDING"

Varah, the founder of the Samaritans, describes befriending as follows:

> *"The befriending which the volunteer offers to the caller is the personal concern of a compassionate fellow human being, who, like the Samaritan in the parable, seeks simply to have him as a friend in his time of deepest need."*[4]

It is clear from Varah's description of "befriending" that the term is not synonomous with the traditional notion of friendship. Bell develops the position

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that the Samaritan concept of friendship does not include the following intrinsic elements of the traditional notion of friendship: (1) A particularistic and freely chosen relationship; (2) A relationship that is symmetrical; (3) A relationship that is an end in itself which involves no ulterior motives; and (4) A relationship involving a predominance of reactive attitudes.[5] Although Bell concludes that it is misleading to claim that the Samaritan concept of "Befriending" constitutes friendship in the full sense he states: "Befriending in the weaker sense of providing help and support in times of psychological stress seems an eminently worthwhile service, most especially for those people who lack friends or who do not wish to burden their friends with their troubles."[6] The concept of "befriending" as used in the balance of the paper will refer to the limited definition advanced by Bell which emphasizes the provision of expressive moral support, advice and/or referral to persons experiencing stress.[7]

SETTING AND METHODOLOGY

The Crisis Intervention Centre studied is Distress Centre One in Toronto, Canada, the first centre in Canada to use the "befriending" concept of the Samaritans as the philosophical basis for its service. Distress Centre One is a voluntary agency that is supported by grants from government and voluntary contributions. Volunteers receive calls 24 hours a day and in 1976 handled an average of 1,700 calls per month. The director, who is a clergyman, and a small group of non-professionals provide the administrative and support services. Data on the volunteers were collected through a mailed questionnaire returned by 115 of 135 volunteers active with the Centre at the beginning of 1977 and from unstructured interviews with a small group of volunteers.

THE "BEFRIENDERS"

As might be expected, the "befrienders" do not represent a cross-section of the total population. The profile of the "befrienders," based on the 115 volunteers who participated in the study, indicated that a "befriender" at the Centre is, most likely, to be female (67 percent), under 45 years of age (60 percent), married or previously married (58 percent) with some post-secondary education (75 percent). The occupation of the "befrienders" is most often professional, managerial or semi-professional (60 percent) with a family income in excess of $15,000.00 a year (60 percent). The majority of the "befrienders" have worked at the Centre for three years or more and have had some previous experience as a volunteer (60 percent), most often in counseling or administration.

The "befrienders" are a relatively homogeneous group when compared with a sample of volunteers across Canada working in different setting. In contrast to our findings, the findings of a national study of volunteers in Canada indicated that the stereotype of the volunteers as a middle-aged housewife with a better than average education and family income, is no longer accurate.[8]

It is our position that several factors interact to produce the type of volunteer that is a "befriender" at Distress Centre One and probably in other crisis intervention centres. Initially there is a self-selection process in which persons with limited education and volunteer experience might be hesitant to offer their services in a situation where it is apparent that they will be expected to assume major responsibility for giving support and advice in an impersonal situation. Not only is there little opportunity to see the results of one's efforts but interaction over the telephone requires verbal skills that are often related to the level of formal education. In addition, we would suggest that in North American middle class, persons have been socialized to accept the lack of immediate and concrete results from either efforts and consequently this type of volunteer effort is probably more attractive to them than to others.

Two of the most important determinates of the type of "befriender" at the Centre One are the selection and training procedures. When a volunteer expresses an interest in working at the Centre he is provided literature which explains how the Centre operates and what is expected of the "befriender." The director of the Centre reports that about one-half of those who show some interest do not follow after reading the literature. In the event the volunteer decides to make a formal application, an interview is arranged to determine his suitability for training. If the applicant is considered to have the potential to be a good "befriender" and wishes to continue, the next step is a training program of four 3-hour sessions held once a week in the evenings. In the selection and training program the volunteer's potential as a "befriender" is determined by evaluating his ability to relate to others, friendliness, insight into his motivations for wanting to work with others, and an understanding of his own needs. The middle class person is more likely to meet these criteria, especially those that involve insight and introspec-

tion. There is no evidence that the Centre has consciously attempted to select the majority of the "befrienders" from the middle class but the Centre's qualifications for acceptance have produced this result. An additional factor, we believe, is the requirement of the Centre that volunteers work overnight shifts about once every month. The careful screening and rigorous training of volunteers is undoubtedly an important factor in the average length of time, over three years, that "befrienders" remain at the Centre when one considers the emotional demands and time commitment required for this type of service.

TABLE 1

MAJOR REASON FOR VOLUNTEERING

Major Reasons	No.	Percent
Altruism	51	44.4
Self interest	40	34.7
Religious/ethical	11	9.6
Other	10	8.7
No Response	3	2.6
TOTAL	115	100.0

The "befrienders" were asked why they volunteered at the Centre. Table 1 shows the major reasons given classified under four headings. More than four out of ten "befrienders" reported that their motivation was altruistic, i.e., they had a desire to do good for others without thought for personal gain. Approximately one-third stated that their major reason for volunteering was for self interest, i.e., they were seeking personal benefits such as experience, growth, knowledge or personal advancement. Only one in ten "befrienders" stated that religious or ethical considerations were most important in their decision to volunteer in this setting. While it is recognized, as Schindler-Rainman points out,9 that motivation to volunteer comes from both inside and outside the individual who makes the decision, it is important to note that the altruism and religious/ethical considerations are seen as major reasons for volunteering by more than half of the "befrienders." This suggests that the major consideration in the decision to volunteer for the majority of the volunteers is consistent with the philosophy of "befriending" which is based on the notion of "doing good" out of compassion and without thought of personal gain. In recent years studies have revealed that self interest is as frequently, or more frequently, mentioned than altruism as the reason for volunteering. The increase in self interest as the major motivation for volunteering has been noted by both Engs and Aves. Engs reports, in her study of Crisis Intervention Centres, that volunteers working for mainly altruistic reasons are more committed in terms of length of service, more dedicated toward their clients and their agency and more enthusiastic than are volunteers attempting to meet their own needs through volunteering.10 Aves found when considerations of self interest were paramount in a decision to volunteer the result was often that the needs of the volunteer were submerged to those of the clients whom the work is intended to benefit.11

COMPASSION IS NOT ENOUGH

Distress Centre One, unlike many social welfare agencies, does not limit its intake. This is, of course, consistent with its philosophy of offering help to all who are in distress and particularly those who feel that the problems are not being resolved by official agencies and programmes. The virtual absence of control on intake means that volunteers are put in the position of handling calls from persons as diverse as alcoholics, psychotics, drug abusers and persons in the midst of an emotional crisis. The concept "befriend" is not broad enough to encompass the appropriate responses to this range of callers. In talking with the "befrienders" it was clear that in dealing with many callers "befriending" with its non-directive approach is not seen as appropriate and is abandoned.

A look at how the "befrienders" view the various types of calls with respect to the difficulty they have in handling them suggests some of the limitations of the concept of "befriending." Table 2 lists nine types of calls in which the percentage of "befrienders" reported they experienced considerable or little difficulty in the handling of each type of call.

More than two out of three "befrienders" reported considerable difficulty in handling suicide and alcohol calls and one out of two drug and repeat calls. Loneliness and masturbation calls (sexual calls used as an aid for stimulation in masturbation) were very difficult for 42 and 35 percent of the "befrienders." The calls that the "befrienders" reported little difficulty in handling were those in which the problems of the caller were marital, general distress or homosexuality.

The explanations for the marked differences in the difficulty experienced in handling calls are, we believe, to be found in the "befrienders" perception of

their ability to deal with the call within the philosophy of the centre and the problematic aspects of the interaction resulting from the use of the telephone for communication.

TABLE 2

TYPE OF CALL
BY DEGREE OF DIFFICULTY
IN HANDLING CALL

(Percentage Reporting)

Type of Call	Total	Considerable Difficulty	Little Difficulty
Suicide	100 (104)*	68.7	31.3
Alcohol	100 (109)	64.7	35.3
Drug	100 (99)	50.6	43.4
Repeat**	100	49.5	50.5
Loneliness	100 (102)	42.6	57.4
Masturbation	100 (104)	36.5	63.5
Marital Problems	100 (103)	24.3	75.7
Homosexuality	100 (108)	19.8	81.2
General Distress	100 (102)	17.7	82.3

*Number following type of call indicates number of volunteers who rated this type of call.

**Repeat callers - any person who calls the Centre more than three times.

It is not unexpected that suicide calls, comprising less than 10 percent of all calls, are identified as the most difficult. These callers have threatened, or are in process of, self destruction, which creates a high level of tension and anxiety. On the other hand, in drug and alcohol related calls the needs of the caller are frequently unclear and efforts at persuasion, reasoning or emotional support are often met with aggressive and hostile responses. The masturbation calls are unpleasant but many "befrienders" are able to deal with them as nuisance calls. It is significant that the Samaritans regard some sex callers as "unbefriendable" since they are seen as unable to accept the offer of a relationship. The calls requesting assistance with problems of general distress and marital problems are seen as the least difficult to handle probably because they are most likely to respond positively to the offer of a relationship and emotional support.

The repeat or chronic callers are somewhat of an anomaly for the "befrienders." In the literature they are identified as a problem or an annoyance because of their dependence on the "befriender" for continuing support; however, it is precisely this type of caller that might be expected to benefit most from "befriending." The difficulty experienced by the "befrienders" in handling these calls is often related to their inability to terminate a relationship that is demanding of their time and energy because the distress is a chronic condition.

BEFRIENDING BY TELEPHONE: SOME OBSERVATIONS

Little attention has been given to how the use of the telephone as the means of the communication influences the interaction of the caller and "befriender." At crisis intervention centres where help is provided by telephone, the form of interaction creates a barrier that protects the participants while giving them more freedom. We will examine some of the sociological aspects of telephoning and offer some tentative explanations of how the use of the telephone shapes the social reality of the anonymous "befrienders" in centres such as Distress Centre One. We are indebted to Ball whose seminal work on the sociology of telephoning alerted us to the importance of some contingencies and conditions that regulate telephone conversations.[12]

In face to face interaction, visual clues and signs are very important in the assessment of the person and situation and when these are not available to the "befriender" and the caller they are involved in, what Ball has termed, "interaction in the dark."[13] Both parties look for clues as to the personal characteristics of the caller in his tone of voice, accent, and speech patterns which usually provide a basis for assessing the urgency of the situation and the ethnicity, age, and sometimes sex of the caller. The "befriender" and the caller must, therefore, construct their social reality on the basis of sound alone.

The optimal situation is one in which the "befriender" is successful in projecting an aural image of trust and compassion while the caller projects an image of one who wants, needs, and can use help. The "befriender" must decide from the aural clues whether or not he has been successful. He is less likely to receive such clues from callers who are

irrational, seeking relief from tension through sex calls, inebriated, under the influence of drugs, or incoherent.

Ball points out that "the opportunity for victimage by the caller of the called is made possible by the important, though rarely made explicit, rule of telephone manners . . . that it is the initiator of the call who shall be its terminator, i.e., the person socially defined as being expected to do the hanging up."[14] The problem of how and when to terminate calls is a continuing problem, especially with reference to repeat, alcoholic, drug and sex calls. If the "befrienders" hang up prematurely they run the risk of destroying the credibility of the centre and perhaps denying service to a truly distressed person. The "befrienders" like many other helpers are unsure and uncomfortable about when to terminate a relationship or to withdraw from a situation when there is still a possibility that they might be helpful.

We have suggested two aspects of the social reality of interaction by telephone that create difficulties for the "befrienders." However, there are other aspects of this reality that facilitate the "befriending process. The telephone makes it possible to bypass the bureaucratic structure of intake that is usually found in traditional social agencies and has been identified as a deterrent to the potential users of the service. The telephone also provides access to help without regard to status and, in the case of Distress Centre One, without regard to time of day or day of the week.

The "befrienders" have a sense of freedom and personal expression in their interaction with callers that is not present in face-to-face interaction. This freedom is reinforced by the policy of nondisclosure of last names of "befrienders" to callers. This anonymity creates a situation in which the "befrienders" have not been exposed to what Goffman calls "potentially discreditable stigma" such as physical disfigurements that may adversely affect face-to-face interaction.[15] Thus, while the exclusive use of the telephone in helping places its own constraints and controls on the interaction it also frees the "befrienders" from some of the limitations imposed by the heirarchy of traditional agencies and by physical appearance. It is of some interest that when the "befrienders" were asked to state their major frustration in working at Distress Centre One, approximately one out of three indicated that it was the lack of opportunity of seeing the result of their work. This response points up another limitation of the exclusive use of the telephone in the helping process, especially when it is remembered that almost half the "befrienders" volunteered because of their desire to help people. In this setting the "befriender" is deprived of a reward that most helpers value, i.e., recognition of the value of their efforts from the person who is helped. This is probably one of the factors that is an important consideration in the recruitment of volunteers.

CONCLUSIONS

Although this paper reports on the volunteer experience in one telephone crisis centre operating in a North American city, we believe that some general conclusions can be drawn that are applicable to volunteer effort in the provision of this specialized service. It is clear that in urban areas there are several groups of potential users of the services of a distress centre, some of these groups are: the lonely and alienated; those who lack the support of friends and family in times of crisis or distress; those who have had unsatisfactory experiences with one or more community services staffed by professionals; and those who are unwilling or unable to request help from community agencies. The alienation and anxiety of many in the above groups are so great that they are, in the first instance, unable to mobilize themselves to request help in a structured setting where they are expected to meet the minimum requirements demanded by most traditional agencies, such as: keeping appointments, an acknowledgment that they have a problem that requires professional help, and a desire to do something about their problem. In establishing distress centres, volunteers have succeeded in providing a needed service which does not involve them in direct competition with professionally trained helpers. This is particularly important as it gives the volunteers a positive self-image at a time when professionals are providing more and more of the services formerly provided through voluntary action.

The concept of "befriending," first advanced by the Samaritans, that is central to the work of many distress centres, is seen as too limited in scope for the range of problems that individuals bring to the centres. There is a need to develop a conceptual framework that accomodates not only "befriending" but also more direct approaches that are indicated to help individuals who cannot or do not wish to establish a relationship.

The nature of the task in telephone distress centres attracts and holds volunteers who possess certain interests and skills that combine to give them satisfaction despite the limitations that were noted earlier; therefore, the recruitment of volunteers should be selective. The

setting not only attracts a certain type of volunteer but the task is a very demanding one in which rewards are seldom visible and direct as in other programs that use volunteers to provide direct services.

If the telephone is to be the exclusive, or major, medium of communication in the social interaction between the helper and helpee, the distress centres should undertake research to determine its impact on the helping relationship. If such research is undertaken it should provide data that will make a contribution to knowledge of this phenomena and an understanding of the dynamics of the interaction between the anonymous "befrienders" and those seeking help.

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FOOTNOTES

[1]Faberow, N. and E. Shneidman, The Cry for Help, New York: McGraw Hill Book Company (1965) and Canadian Intervention Centres, Canadian Directory of Crisis Intervention Centres, Toronto: Canadian Project for Crisis Intervention Centres (1976).

[2]Varah, C., The Samaritans in the 70s, London: Constable (1977), pp. 82-83.

[3]A complete report of the findings can be found in: Gandy, J., J. Campbell, J. Filipowski, and E. Kruk, " A Study of Volunteers at Distress Centre One," (mimeographed) Toronto: University of Toronto, Faculty of Social Work (1978).

[4]Varah, op. cit., p. 82

[5]Bell, J., "The Samaritan Concept of Befriending," British Journal of Social Work, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Winter 1975).

[6]Ibid., p. 421

[7]However, Bremer sees "befriending" by telephone as a revival of the confessional where the priest is replaced by the layman and where the anonymity of the confessional is replaced by the anonymity of the telephone. Bremer, H., "A Study of the Toronto Distress Centre," (mimeographed) Toronto, Department of Sociology, York University (1970).

[8]Carter, N., Volunteers: The Untapped Potential, Ottawa: Canadian Council on Social Development, (1975) pp. 15-19.

[9]Schindler-Rainman E. and R. Lippitt, The Volunteer Community: Creative Use of Human Resources, Washington: N.T.L. Learning Resources Inc., (1971) p. 47.

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[11]Aves, G., The Voluntary Worker in the Social Services, London: Allen and Unwin (1969).

[12]Ball, D., "Toward a Sociology of Telephones and Telephoners," in M. Truzzi (ed.), Sociology and Everyday Life, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, pp. 59-75.

[13]Ibid., p. 71

[14]Ibid., p. 64

[15]Goffman, E., Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, (1963) pp. 41-42.