

Hakomi and the Underserved

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Introduction

by Shai Lavie, MFT, Certified Hakomi Trainer

The Hakomi Method has generally been taught to middle-class, educated people who have the money to pay \$150-200 (in current dollars) per day for a workshop or longer training. Most of us attending these workshops and trainings have done so without seriously reflecting on the level of privilege that allowed us to do so: an income well above minimum wage (or significant savings), a solid educational background (with all the family and social support that makes this possible), a significant amount of free time, and without the recurring experience in our lives of people from the dominant culture doubting our abilities simply because of our racial or ethnic background. The privilege to participate in Hakomi becomes a cyclical system: After we as practitioners learn the method, we usually charge our clients handsomely in private practice settings. In short, it is usually clients who are also quite privileged who have the opportunity to benefit the most from our Hakomi skills.

We can ask: who is left out from this equation? If we think about the range of people living in the United States of America (not to mention the rest of the world) we can start to imagine the array of people who are usually excluded from benefiting from the Hakomi Method: farm workers, military personnel, low-income people living in the inner city, low-income people living in small towns, factory workers, undocumented immigrants, people in prison, refugees from wars overseas, Native Americans living on reservations, and so on.

And yet, there are exceptions. Some in the Hakomi community have taken significant steps to bring Hakomi to underserved populations. In the process, these practitioners have learned to modify the method to best serve the unique needs of their clients (Barstow, 1986; Dall, 1995; Hartman, 1985; Johanson, 1986, 1992, 2012; Johanson & Taylor, 1988, Moyer, 1986; Ortiz, 2009; Whitehead, 1992; Williams, 2012.)

In the following few pages, a few counseling psychology graduate students share their experiences of bringing their Hakomi skills to particular underserved populations.

My hope is that more people in the Hakomi community will bridge their work towards people who would nor-

mally not be able to access it. It is good to step out of our safe ivory tower of educated, middle class America and use our skills in service to the bigger human community, with its diverse needs and concerns. Then Hakomi can help fuel the engine of larger planetary healing and interconnection. Let's listen to the voices of four Hakomi students, and hopefully gain inspiration from their work.

Vivianne Shands, Student at Sofia University

As a third-year student at Sofia University, working toward earning my Master of Arts in Counseling Psychology, I have had the honor of working with undocumented immigrants and their children as part of my practicum program. My placement is with Western Youth Services, a community-based mental health organization that contracts with the County of Orange to provide short-term counseling for individuals who seek services at county-run family resource centers (FRCs).

My coursework at Sofia includes studying Hakomi techniques with Shai Lavie, LMFT, and I have incorporated Hakomi techniques into my work with my practicum clients, often to great effect. Hakomi is an empowering technique, handing over control and expertise to the client while guiding them to contact their own internal resources. The resourcing provided by Hakomi has been especially effective with survivors of domestic violence such as Danielle (a pseudonym), whose story I will share here.

Danielle is a twenty-nine year old Hispanic female with two children who lives in central Orange County, California. She is a stay-at-home mom and an undocumented immigrant. She came to the United States at the age of eight, following her mother who had left her in the care of her grandparents in Mexico five years earlier. As a child she suffered emotional and physical abuse and attachment trauma from the long separation from her mother. As a teenager, she turned to methamphetamine to help her cope, but quit cold turkey at the age of nineteen when she recognized that she was "destroying her life."

She came to the local FRC seeking counseling after she decided to end a relationship and move back in with her physically and emotionally abusive ex-husband. Though she had made this decision, Danielle indicated that she still felt confused and was unsure which man (the new boyfriend or the ex-husband) she should choose. She felt a lot of pressure from both men to make a choice and stick with it. Danielle said she felt like she was "in love" with the new man, but felt obligated to return to her ex in order to keep her family together.

Two years prior to the start of our work together, Danielle was seen at the FRC for counseling by a different therapist, and had been enrolled in the "Personal Empowerment Program" (PEP), after it was revealed that she had been the victim of domestic violence. Danielle attended PEP twice. With the help of PEP and her prior therapist, Danielle created a safety plan and began to take steps to end her abusive marriage. However, she was unable to carry out her plan and continued to stay in the relationship with her husband despite the physical and psychological abuse. Later, she met the new man at her gym and became friends with him. After some time, she realized she had feelings for the new man and began an affair. When her husband found out, she ended the marriage, moved out, and obtained a divorce. However, after some time, she started talking to her ex and he convinced her that she needed to end the new relationship and return to him for the sake of their children.

Since we started our work together, Danielle has again moved out of her ex-husband's house and has begun to explore what it is like to be alone, without the new boyfriend in her life. Danielle reports having intrusive memories of the domestic violence and several other indicators on a PTSD assessment. Nevertheless, Danielle has shown a strong ability to use mindfulness during her therapy sessions. She has demonstrated the ability to quickly calm herself when activated without prompting or instruction.

Danielle did not express much affect during sessions. She would talk about the situation with the two men, her children, and other issues that were causing her stress or anxiety in a conversational way, rarely showing any emotion. The first few sessions I mostly listened and reflected her experience through contact statements. I also introduced the concept of mindfulness and led Danielle in a resource-focused meditation at the end of each session. We focused first on her breathing and then on a gentle stroking motion that I noticed Danielle often did with one of her hands. She described the experience as "calming" and described her hands as "friendly, like holding hands with one of your friends as a child." We would return to these resources repeatedly through our work together, using them to find calm, and to contact her internal strength.

Danielle felt confused, especially about what she described as a tendency to feel guilty and responsible for other people's feelings, even when she knew that they were not her fault. Likewise, she felt confused about her reluctance to be affectionate with her husband, who was pressuring her to show her love for him and demonstrate her commitment to him. Danielle also felt guilty about this lack of

affection. During our fourth session, I asked Danielle if she would like to explore this mindfully, and she agreed.

I invited mindfulness and directed her attention to the caring feeling of her hands holding each other. I then experimented with a probe, saying to Danielle, "You are safe here. It is okay to ask for what you need." She visibly stiffened in response to this, and reported that she felt frozen, like she could not move. This was an indication that she was experiencing the hypo-arousal in response to some sort of trauma, which I suspected might be linked to the domestic violence that she had experienced at the hands of her husband. I invited Danielle to mindfully describe the frozen feeling, occasionally directing her attention back to her hands, which were still holding each other gently in her lap. Danielle said that the frozen feeling was mainly across her chest and in her throat.

I then suggested that perhaps it would be interesting to have one of her hands show their friendship to her chest or throat, and I suggested she might place her hand where she thought it would feel best. She lifted her hand to her throat and was visibly overcome with emotion. It seemed as if she could not speak. I contacted that experience. She nodded. I asked if she was having some memories and she again nodded. She then said she was remembering her husband choking her, and another wave of emotion washed over her. I contacted this, and asked if she was feeling angry. Her brow furrowed deeply and her jaw clenched, and she nodded. I described this anger as "righteous" and contacted the strength I saw, that I knew she must have had, in order to survive such an experience. I also noted that it must be difficult to be affectionate with her husband after this happened. Another wave of emotion broke through, tears falling as she nodded in agreement and understanding.

Throughout this experience, I directed Danielle's attention to the feeling of her hand, and the comfort and friendship she found there. After she came out of mindfulness and opened her eyes, I asked her to orient herself in the room, inviting her to look around and notice a few things. I then let her consider what had just happened and we sat in silence for some time. After a while, she said that she had not thought about that in a long time, and that she could now remember everything in vivid detail. She moved out of her husband's home that week.

Later in our work together, I noticed that Danielle often said "you know" as a kind of tag line or placeholder in her conversation. After listening for a while I pointed it out and asked her if we could try an experiment, substituting "I know" for "you know" as she told me about how her

week went. Danielle laughed and said that she felt self-conscious about it, but slowed down and became thoughtful as she spoke, catching herself saying "you know" and replacing it with "I know." After a while she became quiet and said "it's like I have become aware of myself, and I wasn't before."

In another session, Danielle was finding it difficult to adjust to life without a relationship, sleeping alone in a bed for the first time in many years. During the first separation from her husband, she had the new boyfriend for comfort and company, but this time she was reluctant to continue that relationship. She described being alone as scary and I asked if she would like to explore that fear mindfully. She agreed.

After guiding her into a mindful state, I asked her to invite the fear of being alone in like a guest into her living room. She began describing the fear again as the tightness in her chest. As she felt into the fear, she began to take deep, steady breaths. I contacted her breathing, noting that she was becoming calm. As she focused on her breathing, she seemed to grow taller, more powerful. Her strength radiating from her. I reflected this to her, watching in awe as she seemed to almost glow from within, the power and essence of her being shining through. After some time she said that she felt "empty" and "peaceful," and that she knew she could be alone and it would be okay. "It is strange," she said. "it is emptiness, but at the same time, I know it is not empty because . . . I'm here."

Using mindfulness and Hakomi techniques was incredibly powerful, enabling Danielle to feel her own strength, to experience her own ability to calm and comfort herself, to allow herself to feel the anger of her abuse and to have it be acknowledged, validated, and witnessed by another. It was extremely important to help Danielle access her own strength and to have an experience of her own presence. It had seemed to me that Danielle did not have a strong sense of her own self, her boundaries, and her own wants and needs. Instead, she relied on others to guide her, going along with what they wanted, and forcing herself to be submissive or self-sacrificing. She spoke frequently of how she was supposed to sacrifice her own self for the sake of others. In working with Danielle, my goal was to help her come in touch with her own needs and wants, as well as her own internal strength and resources.

Hakomi is a valuable tool for working with Hispanic women. I have repeatedly heard stories of sexual abuse, extreme neglect, physical abuse, and financial abuse from my clients. Danielle had suffered abuse from childhood

and was raised in a family culture and religious tradition (Catholicism) that emphasized women's self-sacrifice and suffering for the good of the family. She struggled at the boundary between two worlds: The traditional Catholic values in which she was raised and which the women in her family still upheld, and the Southern California culture of female liberation in which she had grown as an adolescent. Her Catholic faith taught her to listen to men and ignore herself, yet her familiarity with silent prayer helped to prime her for the mindful self-inquiry that is the core of Hakomi. She simultaneously pushed back against the role imposed upon her as a female and wished to fulfill it as well. Hakomi helped her to connect with herself in a way she previously had not, and to see that though she often felt pulled in two directions, the right choice became clear when she found the calm and comfort of her own internal resources.

Kamal Ahmed, Student at Sofia University

My name is Kamal Ahmed and I live in San Jose, CA. I'm currently a marriage and family therapist trainee at Sofia University (formerly: Institute of Transpersonal Psychology) and am attaining my clinical hours to become a licensed therapist. I work with the Mind Body Awareness (MBA) Project located in Oakland, CA. I facilitate groups and individual sessions with at-risk and incarcerated youth in Alameda and San Mateo County. I also work as a school counselor for Evergreen School District in San Jose, CA. But the cases I'll share here come from my work with the young men who are locked up in juvenile hall and probationary camps.

I've been using mindfulness-based practices for the past three years and Hakomi-specific methods for less than a year. I've learned basic theoretical and foundational Hakomi principles from certified Hakomi trainer Shai Lavie, LMFT. Hakomi, based on my experience, has given the youth I work with the opportunity to be the experts of their lives and experiences. This is a big deal for these young men, who are locked up because most of their day-to-day activities are already determined by authority figures and court-mandated programs.

Here are two cases where I've been able to use Hakomi.

Antony is an eighteen-year-old African American male from a low-income area in East Palo Alto, CA. We've worked in both group and individual settings. In group, he was guarded and alert. His eyes would usually be searching. He had trouble keeping his eyes closed during weekly deep

breathing exercises. When he did have his eyes open during meditation, he would fidget or mentally check out. He had a lot to share with me and felt comfortable telling me, during our first session together, that four of his six siblings were killed due to street violence. His affect (facial expressions and body cues) and the content were disconnected as he retold these tragic accounts. Curious about this disconnection I said, "I notice you don't seem affected by this when you talk about it." He replied, "They kind of had it coming to them because they weren't on their toes" (i.e., they weren't careful). Anthony would mention that he had to be three steps ahead of people in order to avoid getting played, or manipulated by others. What a scary place to be in, I thought to myself. (And as I write this and reflect on this young man's reality, I notice my eyes beginning to well up.) I knew I needed Anthony to feel safe with me.

The first few sessions we spent getting to know each other. I'll explain more later on how I make a deliberate intention to do this for each of my clients. I did this by being playful and witty with him. For example, when he disclosed the many ways he "was playing the staff" to get what he wanted. I brought it to the here-and-now and asked, "You're really smart and impressive, Anthony. I'm wondering, have you played me before?" He laughed and said, "No! Why would I play you?" I responded with some lightheartedness with a bit of seriousness, "You sure? How do I know you're not playing me now?" I would usually feel comfortable pulling his leg from time to time. We carried that playful dynamic throughout our work together. One session, I noticed Anthony being his usual self, entering the room hyper-vigilant, although he appeared to be happy and excited. I quickly felt a need to help resource him. After a few seconds together, I wanted to try something new with Anthony.

I asked him to scan the room and pick one thing that was pleasant to look at. He scanned the room until his gaze stopped on a space poster that was hanging in the room. I asked, "What about that picture catches your attention?" He answered, "I guess it just looks peaceful." I joined him in this, wanting to validate his thoughts, and said, "It does seem peaceful, huh? How do you know it's peaceful?" He laughed at the question and said, "It just looks peaceful, man!" (He seemed a little anxious, but a lot less than when he walked in). I then said, "What tells you that it's peaceful? Does this image remind you of a peaceful person? Or place?" He then started taking my questions seriously as he noticed me becoming more serious. He said his grandmother was a peaceful person. We processed what his grandmother meant to him and also shifted internally to

focus on the physical sensations of the word *peaceful*. Anthony noted his shoulders falling, breathing more deeply, and feeling relaxed. It was only a matter of seconds before Anthony felt this sense of bliss with me before he snapped out of it and laughed about how different it felt.

I've used Hakomi-based methods with another youth named José. José was part of my group at MBA and I also worked with him individually. He was a jubilant character who enjoyed making others around him laugh. During one of our sessions, José disclosed to me that this was his eighth time being incarcerated. Eight times! I expressed shock through my reaction. He laughed and agreed that it was too many times.

I asked him if there was a part of him that enjoyed being there. He looked at me with a straight face right before he cracked and let out a laugh, as he thought I wasn't serious for asking such a question. I stayed the course and asked him to give the question some thought. Given the relationship and mutual respect we had with each other, I was able to work with him in this way. José thought about it for awhile and said, "I guess I kind of like being here because I'm respected and nobody messes with me. Actually, I run things here. Don't you notice how staff and everyone respects me?" I said, "Yeah, they see you as a leader, don't they?" He nodded.

It occurred to me that this was a missing experience for him: this sense of being seen as powerful. I thought to myself, "What if he could feel this sense of power from within himself so he doesn't have to seek it outside himself?" In order to get the ball rolling and get more information on this missing experience, I needed to immerse him in his experience of power.

José accepted my invitation to examine this sense of power using mindfulness. As we settled into the moment and became more present, I asked him to recall what he shared with me, which he did. I asked him what he noticed. After a few moments, he quickly ran his hand up and down his torso and said, "I feel a lot of things going on here." I invited him to stay with the movement and as he did, he said, "I can feel the power." I asked him where he felt it, and he said it was in his chest. I noticed his spine straightening and I offered, "You can feel that power moving around your core now, can't you?" He silently nodded.

I then invited him to hang out with those sensations and the word *power* for some time. He then mentioned a shooting sensation moving up and down his arm. He slowly opened his eyes while maintaining some inward awareness, smiled and said, "That was a trip, dude!" We laughed and

I explained a little bit more about what we were doing. He liked the idea of being able to access this power within himself instead of habitually relying on external validation.

In our next session, I was surprised to find out that he got an early release from probation camp and was able to go back home. We had merely scratched the surface with the aforementioned intervention. I could see how there was much more work needed in order for José to foster and build his sense of self-acceptance and self-validation. However, the previous experience seemed to make an imprint on him. I hope he can continue to cultivate his true power as he moves forward on his journey.

The attitude and skills of Hakomi have been valuable and supportive in my work with these adolescents: primarily loving presence and the healing relationship. It's not uncommon for these youth to continuously receive negative messages about who they are based on what they've been accused of, the neighborhood they're from, and/or the color of their skin. These vicious messages are fed to them through several channels, such as: family patterns and beliefs, the education system, the criminal justice system, the community, and media. Hence, loving presence, comprised of compassion, curiosity, and attunement is truly a gift to many of these young men.

Leading with this quality of presence has taught me to accept them as they are: as worthy human beings, regardless of what they've done wrong, or who they've been conditioned to believe they are. In order to provide a place for my clients to become aware of the inner workings of their lives, they must feel safe and loved, unconditionally. This, in and of itself, can be a significant source of healing.

This non-combative and accepting approach highlights one of the five Hakomi principles: non-violence. Hakomi posits that the client is the greatest expert on their own experience. When some aspect of my therapeutic agenda is met with resistance, instead of opposing or forcing change, the non-violent approach is to support and honor the client's defenses for the wisdom they contain. Likewise, giving the youth the space to speak of things when they feel ready, as opposed to when we might feel they should be ready, carries two benefits: First, their trust invariably increases as their organic readiness is honored; second, since they do not need to resist the therapist, they can begin to contact and understand their internal experiences, and discover resources that can help them manage themselves better in the highly dangerous worlds in which they live.

In terms of adjusting Hakomi techniques to best work with this population, I still have much to learn, since I'm still

studying and learning the basics of the approach. However, there is one thing I would emphasize—a powerful, not to be underestimated tool—the power of the authentic relationship.

Earlier, I mentioned how I make a deliberate intention to connect with the youth I work with. I'd like to share a bit about that. I'm a firm believer in bringing the entire self into the therapeutic process with these young people. A large percentage of the youth I work with have negative relationships and attitudes towards adults, and rightfully so. Most adults in the past have either failed to be present in their lives and/or have lost hope in them. Yet, despite these negative recurring experiences, there is still a hungry part of them, I believe, that still desires meaningful and gratifying relationships, though they carry deep suspicions.

Youth typically respond well once they feel they're understood and respected. Once they sense that they can trust you and sense that you're there simply because you genuinely care about them, most will soften up and let you in.

This can be done in a number of ways. A few that have worked for me are the following: explicitly or implicitly (through non-verbal communication which translates into interest and curiosity) expressing my desire to connect with them, using skillful self-disclosure, and by encouraging an inter-subjective relationship with them.

In order to have an inter-subjective relationship with a client, therapists ideally bring their personal self along with their clinical self. Many youth need healthy and positive adult relationships. This is done when we're able to show them who we are as human beings, and not just as objective outside helpers, though we are not asking for the mutuality of best friends. To put it bluntly, they know if we are there for them or if we are there for a paycheck.

Here is an example of how this inter-subjective relational approach served me well in a session. One evening, I was facilitating a group of four teenage boys at a maximum security unit in Alameda County. It was our second session. During our weekly check-in, a youth disclosed that he might receive a third strike on his record, and could possibly serve time for the rest of his life. His chance of beating the case, according to him, were slim. Two of his older brothers were doing life in prison and his mother was already going through a lot of suffering because of it.

As he was sharing this, I scanned the group to see where the group members were at. Everyone was silent as he was speaking. One youth was shaking his head as he was hearing this extremely painful and gut-wrenching ordeal. Another youth had a wide-eyed gaze fixed on the one sharing.

I sensed the group connection in the room while I slowly turned my awareness inward. My immediate thoughts were: I could ask questions in order to facilitate further exploration and/or could provide a resource, or any number of commonly used clinical interventions. However, these possibilities didn't sit well with me.

Then I asked myself, "What would I want if I were in this young man's position? What am I feeling toward him as he is sharing?" After he finished for the time being, I said, "I'm really glad you shared that with us. As you were talking, I felt a sense of fear of sitting with the unknown. I wonder how it feels to hold that...it feels like it's a lot to hold. I really care about you and I don't want you to carry all of it alone. I want you to know that I'll be here for you through this, and I know other people in this group will be too."

I paused and looked to the group for signs of affirmation. The two youth I mentioned previously nodded their heads. I continued, "If you need anything please let me or the group know... We're here for you." He was silent while another youth counseled him on focusing on what he can control. The other youth suggested to him to take it day by day. To make sure my words sank in, I said, "I really want you to hear what I'm saying bro..." He stopped me before I finished and said, "I hear you loud and clear. I just never had anyone tell me that since I got here. I felt like I had to go through this all by myself."

Moving forward, I hope to employ Hakomi methodologies that help him explore his inner dimensions with the group. But before doing that, I knew I needed him to know that I care about him to establish the necessary safety and trust. This connectedness, which goes beyond successes in the therapy, will make working with his defenses easier whenever they may show up. This is an example of why bringing the personal self as well as the clinical self is crucial with this, and perhaps all populations.

Christina Toro, Student at Sofia University

My name is Christina Toro. I am currently a counseling psychology student at Sofia University and a marriage and family therapist trainee, completing my practicum training with Partnerships to Uplift Communities (PUC) in Los Angeles, California. PUC is a nonprofit organization dedicated to creating charter schools with the goal of increasing college entrance and graduation rates for underserved students in Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley. I work with the clinical counseling program at PUC that

provides counseling services to the children and families at the schools. I am working at a middle school where my clients range in age from 10–14. All of my clients are Hispanic/Latino and are predominately of a low socioeconomic status.

I began learning about Hakomi principles and techniques nearly a year ago at Sofia University from certified Hakomi trainer Shai Lavie, LMFT. When I began my traineeship several months later, I was able to begin practicing Hakomi techniques with some of my clients.

One of these clients is Ariana (name changed for confidentiality). Ariana is an eleven-year-old Hispanic female, in the sixth grade. Ariana is intelligent and self-aware. She shows a great deal of insight into her emotions and how they are connected to sensations in her body. She is motivated to make changes, and is open to the therapeutic process. Ariana is caring and empathic, always considerate about how others feel. She is a high achiever and a self-described perfectionist. She holds herself to a high standard of performance in almost everything she does. Both Ariana and her mother describe her as sensitive.

Ariana says she gets hurt by the behavior of others, particularly when she perceives them as putting her down or bullying her. Ariana often describes herself as nervous or worried. Ariana has a great deal of anxiety surrounding peer relationships and social situations. She can become extremely distressed in situations where she feels others might be judging her. Ariana began sessions with me expressing that she does not want to feel so nervous or sad so much of the time, and that she wants to feel more in control of her emotions.

I first began working with Ariana by creating safety or the “bubble” as it is described in Hakomi. In the beginning, as I gathered information and got to know Ariana, I offered a lot of validation, normalization, and reflecting back my understanding of what she was sharing with me. These are things I did to create the “bubble” and offer what I hoped would be the foundation of a safe therapeutic environment. I also used contact statements in order to build the therapeutic relationship. I found that when appropriately timed, statements even as simple as, “that’s hard huh?” evoked a lot of emotion and I believe allowed her to feel more deeply understood.

We then began to “practice” mindfulness in order to ease her into these new concepts at a pace that seemed to feel comfortable for her. I was careful to track Ariana closely to gain awareness into the pacing that worked for her. I tried to pay close attention to signs of discomfort to be

sure I was not moving too quickly. Ariana began with some interest in mindfulness already, which was different from the other clients I work with. This allowed for the pace to move along more quickly.

We practiced mindfulness through a few different exercises. We practiced relaxed breathing in sessions. We did guided meditations and progressive muscle relaxation exercises together. Ariana used art to imagine her “calm place,” a candy store, and we applied this to a guided imagery meditation. I attempted to be careful to use language and explanations of mindfulness that were both culturally and age appropriate for Ariana. I did this by using some of her own language. She liked describing herself as being mindful because she said she had used this word in a class where her teacher started the class with a “mindful minute.” The word meditation seemed to hold a little bit of charge for her because of a concern that meditation was “for Buddhists” and she is Catholic. This led to a deeper discussion on the relationship between meditation and religion that seemed to lead to an easing of her mind. I also avoided the use of the word meditation going forward, again attempting to use her own language, and because it did not seem important or necessary to our work together.

Ariana was open and eager to do all of these exercises and would often come into sessions asking for more. I believe these activities helped Ariana to deepen her understanding of mindfulness and were helpful in evoking mindfulness during later Hakomi work together. I also believe this stage of introducing mindfulness offered her resources to use as coping mechanisms for dealing with her feelings of anxiety and nervousness. Ariana has reported using these activities during times of high stress and nervousness.

All the while that I have been working with Ariana, I have also been trying to track her non-verbal cues closely. Being that she is a self-described perfectionist, I have found myself particularly on the lookout for discrepancies between what she says to me and what her tone of voice, averting of eyes, movement in her body, etc. are saying. This is because I want to be aware of times she might be “people pleasing” with me. I have already sensed from her a bit of a desire to “do therapy” perfectly. She is compliant so I want to be extra careful that any of my guidance in sessions is in her best interest and at her pace. Also, I sense that if I am inaccurate or wrong about something, she will not correct me. For these reasons, I know tracking and attunement to her is especially essential so that I can know when to self-correct any misses.

Lastly, I used the experiment in mindfulness of a verbal

probe with Ariana. On the first occasion of using this technique, after eliciting mindfulness, I used the probe, “You are okay the way you are.” Ariana reacted by first physically opening into a big smile. This was followed quickly by averting her gaze and curling in on herself a bit. When I shared what I observed with her and asked her about her experience, Ariana said that it made her feel happy to hear me say those words, but that she does not believe them at other times.

This experimental probe showed what I believe to be Ariana’s organic yearning to be accepted for who she is. It then seemed to have the effect of engaging her defensive strategy to protect herself, shown by her rejecting the statement. At a later session, I attempted this probe again with a bit of an alteration to make it more relational, saying, “I like you just the way you are.” This led to a similar reaction of smiling and then stating that not everyone feels that way about her. She then shared the story of an incident of severe bullying that seemed to be the catalyst of her deep yearning to be accepted for who she is. This is a typical barrier that positively phrased experimental probes in Hakomi are designed to evoke.

With many of my other clients I am still in the stages of safety and trust building, as well as establishing their capacity for mindfulness, since experiments in Hakomi rely on mindfulness. I use different mindfulness exercises, like guided imagery, guided meditations, progressive muscle relaxation, and metaphors and art to practice and expose my clients to mindfulness in a way that feels age appropriate and hopefully fun.

One thing I have learned about applying Hakomi from working with Ariana and the population I work with is that I must move at the client’s pace. Often this pace means slowly, particularly when introducing Hakomi concepts and techniques. I have found that mindfulness-based concepts, even just a focusing on breathing, are very new, and often strange feeling concepts for the kids and families I work with. A respect of these feelings that may arise in them, as well as a respect for each individual’s pace and timing, seems the most important piece of having success in applying Hakomi techniques with this population.

In order to be respectful of each individual’s pace, I have found the Hakomi technique of tracking to be useful. I try to closely track for signs of discomfort or resistance. If I miss these, I will often find the attempted experiment to be unhelpful. This is likely because I have moved too quickly. I have found the concept of appropriate pacing to be a dance I have yet to perfect. There seems to be a fine

balance between moving into what may feel like resistance in order for a new experience or understanding to emerge and slowing down in order to not push a client too quickly into what might be becoming my own agenda. This is where tracking myself and mindfully checking on my own process is important.

I believe this approach has been helpful. At a certain point all but one of my clients has become open to and interested in at least some aspects of mindfulness. I am not entirely certain that initial resistance to mindfulness and somatic techniques is solely cultural, as I believe many people might find mindfulness to be a new and strange concept for many reasons. I do think the idea of following the client’s lead and giving them as much time as they need to be comfortable is a helpful approach.

Another important learning I’ve had in using the Hakomi approach with the population I am working with is the willingness to have open and honest conversations about religion and spirituality, combined with a willingness to deeply explore mindfulness. The majority of my clients identify as Catholic and openly discuss their religion and beliefs in sessions. Many of my clients turn to their belief system as a form of support and healing. I have found that some are concerned that practicing mindfulness might be against their religious beliefs. I feel this is a valid concern, but one that can easily be put to rest with some education and explanation of what mindfulness is and what it is not. I have found that practicing and evoking mindfulness does not necessarily mean I should use words like *meditation* or *mindfulness*. Therefore, the use of language and explanations that are culturally relevant, as well as age appropriate, is important in working with this population.

I have often found it helpful to use a metaphor that the client can relate to in order to explain mindfulness. I like to pick something that I have learned the client loves, perhaps a sport or music, and help the client paint a picture of what being really in the moment with that thing feels like for them. I often use art to help explore this moment and feeling. This allows me to attempt to explain mindfulness to each client based on his or her own experiences. My hope is that this makes the concepts I introduce later more understood and relatable in some way.

I have found working with this population to be extremely rewarding. I am continuously amazed at my clients’ abilities to be open, vulnerable, and willing to try new things. I think it is extremely beneficial to be exposed to mindfulness at such a young age. It is my hope that any bits and pieces of mindfulness and Hakomi that they may take

away will support them again and again throughout their lives.

Micah Anderson, Student at Sofia University

Don't turn your head. Keep looking at the bandaged place. That's where the Light enters you.
— Rumi

Introduction

I work with incarcerated youth through the Mind-Body Awareness Project. As a therapist in training, I have had the benefit of being introduced to the teachings and methods of Hakomi, and I have found that many of the interventions have been useful in the juvenile hall in our group sessions, despite the original focus of Hakomi on individual therapy. Techniques such as contact statements, accessing and deepening, and immersing the client(s) in mindfulness, are all integral parts, in some form or another, of my weekly groups with the youth. While all these methods provide an increasingly important lens from which I engage the youth, *tracking* in particular is one that I have had to learn from the beginning, even before I knew the Hakomi name and context of it.

Let me share a little about this specific population. My clients spend the majority of each day in isolation, sitting in a cell alone. They are separated from their families, communities, and friends. They come from pasts ridden with aggression as the only way to survive. Many live in places where violence is imminent at any moment, even from a simply perceived threatening look from the eyes of a stranger. Sentencing is often incomplete or in the midst of being processed where years, even decades, of freedom are hanging in the balance. Regret and fear are tangible realities for these youth, despite their defensive mechanisms to cover them.

The Clinician Tracking His/Herself

The ability to track all this swirling experience by the facilitator is essential to maintain the “bubble,” so that safety and openness is promoted and preserved. In Hakomi, tracking has been described as a “kind of loving attention” (Weiss, Johanson, & Monda, 2015, p. 159). While I agree with this, I feel that while running groups in juvenile hall, tracking must be infused with a raw authenticity; the therapist's own as well as the group participants'.

Reflecting back on the many groups I have facilitated in juvenile hall, I notice that the ones in which the flow was

the most natural and the bubble strongest, were the ones where I was compassionately aware of my own inner experience—or to borrow a Hakomi term, where I *tracked* my own inner experience—as well as the group process.

The more engrained the habit of tracking myself becomes, the better off I am. It is the doorway to lessen reactivity and to improve how I engage emotions, especially difficult ones, whether I am with a client or with family and friends. When I bring gentle, authentic awareness to my present experience as I am feeling it—as an impartial witness—I can be more embodied, which helps me be more present for the client. I know within the context of juvenile hall, tracking has become an integral part of my ability to serve the youth in the best way possible. Triggers can easily arise within me, and I need to keep kind awareness of them so I don't react or judge them, but simply notice them and go back to the task at hand, namely the healing of the client or group.

Tracking clients for verbal and nonverbal cues is the next logical step in this progression. The statistic from Daniel Goleman that 90% of emotional states can be tracked by non-verbal cues is remarkable (Goleman, 2005, p. 152).

Tracking the Group

Tracking information the client is giving off is important, specifically in juvenile hall where clients in the group may not always feel safe to share openly. Sometimes these non-verbal clues might be all a clinician has to go on. Bringing awareness to what is being said and expressed in the group verbally and non-verbally supports a much deeper and fuller understanding of the client and their group dynamics. I like to keep in mind that what the client *isn't* saying can be just as important as the words they are speaking.

When serving the youth who are incarcerated, I find there are other key elements to track such as (but not limited to):

- Who stops to speak or say hello when entering the room, and who walks in without much to say, or much interaction or eye contact of any kind.
- Where attendees sit in the circle, who they sit next to (or away from), and how far they sit away from each other. Do they move their seat or desk?
- Interactions between the group members during the group itself, specifically on a meta-level. Tracking subtle interactions here is important.
- There are also two sub-groups that are impor-

tant to pay close attention to when tracking the group: peers and leaders. Entering a class in juvenile hall, a facilitator must be mindful that there is always a back-story with the youth who are in the circle; a back-story of friendship and camaraderie and/or possibly one of resentment, anger, and mistrust.

Peers can bring a wonderful opportunity for the group to move quickly towards cohesion, empathy, and authenticity. With peers, often a level of trust has been reached beforehand that can be used by the facilitator. One can capitalize on the peer relationship to promote deeper sharing, supportive words, and feedback from each other.

While the term *leader* may initially be thought to mean the group facilitator or clinician, a leader might also be the strongest personality of the group, and he/she should be treated as such. It is of extra importance to track and engage this member. When the most charismatic member of the group can be engaged on an authentic level, promoting his/her buy-in, other members of the group see this example and tend to follow suit. Tracking who this member is takes time, and there is not a sure-fire way of knowing it. He/she could be a quiet one, or the most rambunctious one. In either case, it is someone who demands respect in such a way that the other youth yield to him or her.

Tracking a Leader: A Case Example

In one of my groups it was clear who the leader was. Miguel (name changed) was Latino, and the only member who had come to our groups in weeks. I immediately engaged him as the leader, as he was the one who invited the other members to attend the group, all who claimed to be new or returning after a period of time.

We started with a check-in. On the side, I asked Miguel to start as a model, and he agreed. Introductions and agreements were stated (which included confidentiality, and a conversation on mandated reporting), plus agreement on one-mic (meaning one person speaking at a time, and respect)

After I asked Miguel to check-in, he took a breath (something we promote before someone checks in), and claimed he was "chillin." He disclosed how he had spoken with his girlfriend the previous night and learned that she had had a miscarriage of their child, a boy. He became emotionally triggered. As he spoke, the other group members quieted down. Miguel's triggered emotions increased and he became visibly shaken, at times fighting off tears, but I tracked through his eye movements and tone of voice that

he was also regulated, while withholding more underlying emotion. I didn't push the withholding at this time.

While tracking Miguel, there was suddenly a subtle understanding between us both that he recognized *my* awareness of his suffering, and that it could jeopardize his standing with the other members of the group. I believe we both understood this, but no words were exchanged. After it happened, he quickly changed topics, directing resentment towards one particular staff member as well as other members on the unit. Other group members soon joined in his chorus of anger against this particular staff member, and the mood quickly shifted from what it was a few moments before.

I asked the group to try to adhere to the "one-mic" agreement, trying to get them back to where we were a few brief moments before, contacting the change in his mood. "Go back to what you were talking before with your baby-mama" (a term used to signify a woman with whom one has a child, but to whom one is not married). He firmly declined to do so, continuing on about his anger with the staff.

I knew that he had brushed up against something too tender, and that he was retreating in order to maintain his standing in the hierarchy of the room, as well as his own composure. I yielded to him, recognizing this as a strength in terms of knowing his own boundaries.

Tracking Resistance

As mentioned before, the embodiment of authenticity is foundational to MBA's work with incarcerated youth in disarming resistance when it inevitably arises. Resistance can be tracked in many ways through fidgetiness, silence, humor and/or talkativeness, or raw aggression. When resistance shows itself in the room, we go directly towards what is arising in the moment, by tracking and then contacting the resistant behavior. "Really triggered right now, huh?" "So, something really upsetting about that?" "Seems like the humor is really taking over?" "The silence is here saying...?" This mirrors what we, as mindfulness practitioners, do. Each and every thing that arises in our field of awareness is possibly worthy of further curiosity and investigation, and could be something that leads deeper into transformation, no matter how difficult or ugly it seems to be.

Resistance should never be ignored, but engaged with skillfulness and presence. No matter how it may manifest; through aggression, humor, silence, or something else, resistance arises for a purpose. It is a protective mechanism intentionally or unintentionally put out by a group member to cover or hide real emotional wounding and trauma,

and must be handled with care. Resistance can be used as a doorway for authenticity, conversation, and ultimately transformation. Just as an empathic break in the therapeutic alliance can offer a chance for the clinician to model repair, forgiveness and healing, resistance offers similar opportunities.

Tracking Resistance: A Case Example

In a recent group in a San Francisco Bay Area juvenile hall, I had three young men who were mandated to attend. One, an African-American male of 16, made clear eye contact, smiled, and was talkative when he arrived in the room. He amiable, he was happy to be coming. The other two who entered after him were young Latino males, both reserved, and both making little eye contact. I introduced myself to both of them before they entered, as I was standing at the door, welcoming the attendees. I immediately sensed a bit of resistance from both of them, feeling that one, if not both of them preferred not to be in the group. After sitting down and starting the group with an introduction of myself, I contacted this still tangible energy with a question, asking, "So let's keep it real here. Who isn't feeling being here right now?"

This question promoted a discussion around authenticity. It ended up the African-American male *was* excited to be in the group, one of the Latino youth claimed to be neutral ("I'll wait and see..."), and the other one, disclosed he did not want to be in the group. "I really would rather not be here," would prefer to be participating in the recreation period, which was taking place outside the room we were in. This face on a week to week basis;

I made eye contact with him, took a breath, in that order, and told him I was impressed with his level of authenticity that he had since he entered this group, adding that I appreciated him "keeping it real" with me. I told him, as I often tell those who come to MBA's hybrid class/process groups, my only expectation of them is that they speak their truth and remain authentic, even if it means saying something they think I might not want to hear. I finished with, "don't give the right answer, give the *real* answer." This small approach and intervention, which took place within the first 2 minutes of our sitting down, immediately started orienting them towards a culture of self-awareness and trust.

Tracking During Meditation Instruction

Another time tracking is essential is when we lead meditations for the youth. An MBA group is a combination of group process in the form of a "check in," possibly a didac-

tic portion, exploring, and often, a facilitator led mindfulness-based meditation. There is also a curriculum, which in certain groups is used and can run up to 10 weeks, offering and setting for the. These weekly modules are focused on topics such as mindfulness, forgiveness, empathy, and emotional awareness.

For guided meditations, it is essential that the facilitator tracks the participants while offering instructions. Before starting a meditation, we always explain what is about to happen, which I believe is a trauma-informed approach. For example, we tell the youth that closing their eyes is best in terms of closing out visual distractions, but if at any point they become triggered, they have option of opening their eyes so they can check the room. While leading a meditation, one must track the energy in, or often outside, of the room, and names. I find it best to mention any distraction, contacting it, if you will to use a Hakomi term, in the mediation instructions themselves. For example, if I notice youth becoming fidgety, I will contact this in the instructions saying something like, "if you start to feel the need to move, or if you are getting fidgety, I invite you to notice what it is like to watch the urge for a few seconds rather than move immediately." This manner of contact can be done when noticing people dozing, or opening their eyes, or if one is attempting to lead a meditation in a loud unit, which is commonplace.

To conclude, I have found that tracking youth in the juvenile hall in groups or individual sessions is an essential skill for clinicians engaged with this population. With histories of trauma, struggle, and survival incarcerated youth are a population who embody a massive reservoir of resilience and strength. In the experience of this writer, they are low-hanging fruit, ready to blossom and deepen into their authenticity, awareness, and renewed hope.

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