The Different Shades of Confidentiality

Confidentiality is important in all work undertaken by counsellors and psychotherapists. However, while this is a blanket requirement, different nuances and aspects of particular situations inform the application of confidentiality. Consider the following scenarios:

- **Joanne** is a six-year-old girl seeing a play therapist in a family centre. She talks to her therapist about the 'nasty man next door' who does things to her she doesn't like.
- **Derek** is a 72-year-old man with a terminal illness. He is cared for at home by his partner and social services. During his counselling session he talks of wanting to be dead.
- **Darren** is a 17-year-old man diagnosed with early onset psychosis. He tells his psychotherapists of the voices he hears and how they are telling him to kill himself.
- **Justine** is a 32-year-old accountant. She talks to her counsellor of her guilt at having stolen significant sums of money from a rich client.
- **Taryn** is a 40-year-old counsellor trainee. In her counselling she discloses racist views and talks of never wanting to work with 'black people'.

These simple scenarios each bring a different take on the concept of confidentiality. A widely acknowledged ethical and legal principle is shaped differently by the context in which it is being applied. Here, the therapist's understanding of confidentiality needs to be considered in the context of other expectations, which might include legal and policy requirements. For example, child protection, free will, self–determinism and human rights, mental health legislation, criminal law and anti–discrimination: all aspects may have legal parameters, in all likelihood policy or procedural parameters – depending on the context in which therapy is being delivered – and certainly all have ethical implications for the counsellor or psychotherapist to manage. As we can see, the application of such defining factors can be profoundly complex in the context of human experience and the therapeutic process.