

Ken Gray

Choice through Counselling

A central aspect of counselling is that of enabling people to make choices as a result of their increasing autonomy. These choices, born out of the growth of self-awareness and insight, can be choices of action or attitude. Although some counselling is, at least in the short term, concerned with choice making as a way of resolving "problems", counselling is also about the everyday development of people and the choices they make or don't make in their movement towards being self-actualising persons.

In the Western culture, where great emphasis is laid on the making of decisions about alternative courses of action and on struggling to reach personal goals, we often lose sight of the choice process itself as a desirable goal. One reason may be that choice is usually accompanied by anxiety:

"I experience dread in the dizziness of my freedom, and my choice is made in fear and trembling" (Kierkegaard)

Making choices may be linked to both neurotic and existential anxieties. Choices may result in learning: neurotic anxiety is triggered by a subconscious apprehension that there is about to be a painful change in the self concept through learning. Choices are made in advance of data so the outcomes are not by any means perfectly determined; all choices are made in the face of uncertainty. And yet, being human is a state of need which demands choice and decision.

Counselling can assist people to choose by providing a milieu in which they can clarify wants or needs, values and beliefs, and proceed to decisions about how and when to get what they want. The counsellor can do this by attentive listening and making appropriate interventions designed to clarify the client's position: these interventions are blended according to the counsellor's model and may include the reflection of feelings, seeking and giving information, seeking and expressing feelings, testing understanding and giving or eliciting interpretation. The counsellor will have some modulated emotional involvement with the client and the process is helped by the counsellor's vulnerability or openness. There can also be opportunities for clients to try out behaviours "as if" in real life; in short, counselling can provide an accepting and non-judgmental environment in which the consequence of trying out a poor choice is learning and not the loss it might be in life.

Counselling is about *freedom*. Although the freedom of individuals is restricted by the rights of others and by their personal capabilities, there can be no doubt that most people do not make use of the freedoms they do possess and counselling can afford an opportunity to explore those freedoms constructively for the future. Although choices about future *actions* are often central

to clients' concerns, as important are choices about *attitudes* to past and future events because our view of the past may partly determine what we do in the future and also because although our actions may be constrained by circumstances, our attitudes need not be.

So what is an "optimal" choice: I'd define it as the selection or construction of one preferred alternative from a range of alternatives through the use of an appropriate blend of intellect, feeling, intuition and sensation.

This involves more than seeing choice as an either/or activity: two alternatives may not embody complete descriptions of possibility e.g. choosing in belief between "behaviourism" or "humanistic psychology". Clients can be guided into an exploration of the fertile plain surrounding these brightly-lit cities. It also means *creating* choice, either by becoming aware of existing choices or by actually constructing choices, giving *form* to previously formless material. Of course, we need to establish whether choice is real or illusory - whether we really do have the power to choose and hence determine outcomes, at least in part, or whether we don't. There are two levels to this question:

1. *is my perception and belief about my choices accurate, and,*
2. *is existence out of my hands anyway?*

The second question is clearly of great significance to the whole idea of counselling: if the conventional way in which we give form or meaning to existence *is* an illusion, the *maya* of some Eastern philosophies, then counselling which operates at this level contributes to the illusion. If facts and events are illusions, then what can counselling achieve? A choice in an illusory world is no choice at all.

It is this last statement that contains a key to the choice-related aspects of the counselling situation. Not only should counselling afford an opportunity for the better use of choice but should also enable the client to use "nochoice" as an option of utility. I don't mean by this that the client is encouraged to abandon his facility for active choice, to become passive, but to act without forcing himself to act. Just as the good counsellor will listen without straining to hear, so will the client who uses effective counselling effectively choose without strain, naturally and easily, as seems required. In this way, choices are not made before their time and the opportunity cost is not paid far in advance; in this way, the client can be guided to live more of her life with immediacy, concretely, in the "here and now".

Mandy was a client who gave concern to all around her by her depressive episodes, and who seemed beset by choices - "am I doing the right course, is this the right college for me, what do I want in my relationships, would I be better off at home, married, and so on?" Some of these choices seemed to be constructed of What do I want to do? What am I doing? What should I be doing?

It was possible to work in two basic ways with this client. First, to help her review and clarify values and beliefs, and second, to help her experience what she might think and feel having made certain choices. In these ways, we were able to do something about her psychic processing and also get her some more information. But she did not arrive at clear decisions about choices to be made - some of these choices had not, in fact, yet arrived - and she made a choice when the 'right' choice was beautifully clear, when she felt it was right.

The teleological anxiety which can obstruct choice making is also related to our Western view of time. The temporal nature of our consciousness is such that we make representations of reality involving a time domain which is linear and in which events occur in sequence. We refer to one event preceding or succeeding another. Dorothy Lee, who studied the Trobrianders, gives examples of the ways in which this particular consciousness of time pervades our thoughts and perceptions: "we *trace* a historical development; we follow the *course* of history; we follow a *line* of thought, or the *direction* of an argument."

A difficulty faced by clients is that of planning ahead, to make the choices which they "see", stretched out before them, each with its own cost in terms of foregone alternatives. Some clients get so far as to structure choice in terms of the branches of a tree of decisions.

In a more *present-centred* mode of consciousness, such as that brought about in Zen, choices are not seen in the same way. Choice only exists in the NOW; the more fleeting is the NOW, the less choice is and the more being/doing *am*. In the total NOW of "no-time", choice *am*. (Since our language is constructed in the traditional mode of consciousness, it is inadequate to deal fully with other modes). In encouraging clients to be more aware in the present I am not asking them to drift into passivity but to seek an active nonchoosing, a "working through" of experience and to gain the satisfactions of giving themselves fully to the present moment.

There seem to be some essential components of choice:

1. *establishing whether choice is real or not, both in everyday practicalities and in terms of the client's representation of reality.*
2. *acquiring the power to choose. By this I mean the personal power which is inherent in recognising the validity of myself as a person and my wants/needs.*
3. *making central choices concerned with values-beliefs-attitudes.*
4. *that choice can only be optimal when all possible psychic processes - intellecting, feeling, sensation and intuition - are appropriately used.*

5. *that choice making need not be rational; it can be arational, making use of modes of consciousness which are not usually open to us.*

Finally, there seem to be only two times at which choice can be made -NOW and NOT NOW; I see part of my work as helping clients to understand the anxiety which bridges these times.

References

Kierkegaard: see W. Lowrie, "Kierkegaard", New York: O.U.P., 1938.

Dorothy Lee: "Codifications of Reality: Lineal and Nonlineal". *Psychosomatic Medicine*. 12, No. 2, 89 - 97, 1950.

Graham F. Cooper

The Counselling Approach

There are many people around who are capable and willing to give help to those in need, and I want to write here about the processes and kind of conditions which are most likely to fulfil a person's needs. In choosing the title "The Counselling Approach" I want to make it clear that I am not just talking about counselling in a formal sense, or the involvement of a "Counsellor."

The title of this article has been taken from a film (1) which attempts to demonstrate the basic process of counselling, and, whilst it will be necessary to make some references to the qualities of the counsellor, I am using the word counsellor to simply mean the person who is offering help to another person who is in need. The use of the word counsellor in this context is in no way intended to be exclusive, nor is it intended to imply any kind of elitism by professionals. It is also worth noting that the recently-formed organisation BAC chose as its title British Association for *Counselling*, not British Association of *Counsellors*, as one journalistic article unfortunately headlined it. There is a world of difference between these two, one being centred in the counselling process whilst the other is centred in the counsellors' interests.

The concept of the counselling approach was first crystallised in my mind when I was asked to facilitate a training course for school nurses. The object of this training course was not to turn them into any kind of professional Counsellor (with a capital C), but rather to give them some insight into themselves and the concepts of human relations which would enable