

# COUNCELLING PHILOSOPHY

## an exploration

by

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### Introduction

In training Counsellors on South West London Counselling courses I often propose workshops where people can explore their motivations for being or becoming Counsellors.

This investigation of personal history and background soon leads to a more general self exploration, helping the person who is learning to help others to understand themselves. It is important that people have the opportunity to become cognisant of and to come to terms with their view of the world, their views about health and illness, and to have a clear view about how they see their role as counsellor as well as being able to constructively discuss their methodology and evaluate their work.

Indeed when working as a counsellor each interaction with the client is implicitly set against the background of an individual's views on life - ideas about the nature of human beings - or expectations about the ideal outcome of counselling. In other words: whatever methods used and in which

ways you attempt to safeguard the client's independence and your own non interference with her life views and opinions, the wider perspective of the counselling relationship will nevertheless be coloured by the view on the world that is presently yours. To a certain extent this view of the world will be transparent to the client - and will therefore interfere with the client's ability to recognize her own view. Your definitions of self will influence her perception of self and may therefore hinder or stimulate her relationship to the world. The influence of the counsellor on the client, although partially controlled and to a certain extent always desirable, cannot easily be overestimated. This influence is based on the representation of the world that the counsellor implicitly presents to the client and the attitude to life and living that she models. In training to be a counsellor it is therefore of utmost importance to pay adequate attention to the recognition and definition of the world view currently operating in your mind.

It may sometimes be difficult at first to clearly formulate what assumptions and values you do hold or adhere to. It may seem tempting to believe that you are nearly free of any bias. It may even appear to you that surely most people think in similar ways and believe in similar things - or at least that the sort of people interested in training as a counsellor will probably all have similar ideas about people and helping people. Not so. As many counsellors there are - or for that matter as many clients there are - there are as many different points of view.

Of course when counselling a client you relate to the client's ways of seeing things - you will help the client to understand her way better and perhaps to change it. But how could you do this appropriately without having in the first place examined your own views in some detail? How could you help the client to come to terms with difficulties, without having come to terms with what makes you yourself enjoy or spoil life? How also will you be able to monitor your impact on the client without optimum clarity about the nature of that impact, If a client brings you a problem to do with sexuality, what will your inner resonance with that problem be? Without being aware of your whole past sexual history and your exact motivations for approving or disapproving of certain aspects of sexuality - you cannot know where your basic approval or disapproval is likely to lie. In short: although the "ideal" counsellor may perhaps

never approve or disapprove of anything, although ideally you will accept and understand above and beyond the capability of an ordinary human being, the "real", normal, human counsellor that you are will in fact naturally have opinions and value judgements, likes and dislikes. Instead of imposing these, unawares on the client - it is better to recognize and acknowledge them, respect them and understand them - for only then will you find the capacity to explore with the client her beliefs, opinions, and judgements, respect those as you did your own, and understand them so that you can accompany the client as she gains that same respect and understanding - first of self then of other.

Examining your philosophy of life and your philosophy of counselling is more than just the first step to becoming a counsellor; it is in many ways the essence of being a good counsellor. In order to make a start with this outlining of your philosophical position, here are some guidelines that will indicate a general direction of enquiry.

### **View of the world**

Before you can formulate your philosophy of counselling as such, you have to start asking yourself some very basic questions about life. How do you see life? What to you, at this point in time, does it mean exactly "to be alive"? What do you imagine there might be other than being alive - or being dead? What do you believe death to be - is there an

afterlife in your view - if so, - what kind(s)? What would there be if nothing existed - no life and death? What **is**? And what is possible? What is the meaning of humans being alive on this planet? What is the sense of being alive - being human? How do you define human beings as opposed to say animal beings?

So what do you perceive as the life task of human beings, both as animals and as specifically human?

Having explored the parameters of your universe, you now can consider the internal structure of it.

One of the main lines along which you can explore the ways in which you make sense of your world is by examining the values you hold.

What do you generally consider to be desirable, useful, helpful, or positive, i.e. good? And what seems usually undesirable, useless, harmful or negative, i.e. bad? This description of values could cover many different aspects of life - because in each area of living we hold opinions - these may change or vary from time to time, but there are usually some firmly based essential opinions and judgements that influence our various points of view.

So, although you may at some point in your life hold for example that homosexuality is wrong, at another time you may consider it not only right but possibly desirable, and although these changes of view may seem like a total turnabout, it is

likely that both these opinions are ultimately based on the same basic idea interpreted differently. In this case your basic value might be deep respect for human freedom, which can be at the core of your original contempt for homosexuality, which you see as limiting human freedom because you have only heard of it in connection with perverse attacks on children. Then, this same value of respect of human freedom can express itself in your acceptance of homosexuality when you discover that for some people homosexuality is an assertion of human freedom and doesn't imply the limitation of it in another human being. You may even come to choose it if you, say, find that your own freedom is safer through becoming homosexual.

Similarly both a disagreement and an agreement with, say, euthanasia can be based on the same basic value of "respect for life". As long as life is defined as a continuation of certain organic processes you may consider every form of technical and medical assistance to be of the greatest importance: because organic life must continue cost what may. But if you then turn your definition of life in a different direction to include a spiritual dimension for instance which induces you to believe that life may flow more completely where natural death is not prevented - and that thus in cases where only mechanics could keep one alive - natural death is preferable to prolonged artificial life, you then might become in favour of euthanasia - though your basic value, i.e. respect for life - is still unchanged.

Although it is important for a counsellor to have awareness of both basic values and current definitions and interpretations of reality, current definitions and interpretations of reality should be more open to questioning and change. At least as a counsellor you should be capable of understanding those various different interpretations of reality that can come forth from your own set of basic values.

### **View of health and illness**

When you have a basic understanding of your whole world view, you can consider more specifically what in your opinion constitutes healthy living. When do you decide that someone lives a sane life? This probably is closely linked to your basic values: most likely will you see a way of life as healthy in as much as it is consistent with your basic values - and unhealthy or sick in as much as it is deviant from these guidelines.

Going back to the example above: you will 'be inclined to call homosexuality an illness if it seems to go against your definition of health, because it goes against your basic value. We all operate with a certain number of preconceptions about what optimum living consists of. You may use the classic opposition health/illness, or you may think of it in terms of strength and weakness - well and poor functioning or adjustment and maladjustment. However you name it (depending on your basic value system) there will

always be some way in which you distinguish what is "well" from what is "unwell".

This is the fundamental distinction at the back of your mind telling you (although you may not want to hear it or speak it) whether your client is well or unwell - at ease or diseased and telling yourself how unwell or diseased she is - in other words these opinions on health and illness, whichever way you express them, are always there in some way, determining your view on the client's problems, formulating explicitly or implicitly what the medical profession calls a diagnosis.

It is therefore important not to deny the practice of diagnosis. Not formulating a hypothesis on your client's state in a medical fashion does **not** prevent your professional judgement of the client's state of health. You will assess this state in your own way anyway. So before you can work as a counsellor you need to determine what kind of parameters you will be using to assess the client's health or unhealth - you need to make the implicit explicit and bring to your own awareness how you would want to see your client in order to judge her "cured", "better", or "able" and "at ease", in short healthy again.

It is in order to have a clear idea at the outset of counselling about a) what is wrong for the client b) what would make things right for the client. And you need first to consider your own view on this

question in general terms. Of course once you actually work with the client you will consider her view on her specific situation.

### **View of the role of the counsellor**

This leads to the consideration of how much you are prepared to influence the client with your own world view and with your goals for health?

Influence there will necessarily be - even if you operate from a completely client centered frame you will necessarily impress on the client what you consider right in each case. For instance after defining yourself as "person centered", you would among other things imply that you believe the client needs to do the work himself or herself. You influence the client's experience of herself by this implication of your truth: the client will tend to use your non-directiveness as a measure for her own, for instance.

It now becomes essential to clarify for yourself what exactly you want to achieve in counselling. Is it help you want to offer, support and understanding, or do you want to train the client in new life skills or in greater expression of emotions? Is it insight or change for the client that you are after? How actively should you commit yourself to any or all of these goals and how long do you want to pursue these goals with the client? Have you completed

your job when the client feels basically normal or OK - or when the client has been able to adjust to external demands, in family or profession? Do you want the client to prove she doesn't need counselling anymore by performing certain "desirable" acts like say, moving out of the old situation, getting work or different work, by moving house or getting married or divorced - having a child or an abortion? Or do you feel rather suspicious of such changes and do you favour the client's increased ability to tolerate stress? Do you want the client to achieve external goals or do you want her to face her inner truth?

It is of course only if you have thought through these issues individually that you can pronounce yourself committed to a certain code of ethics. As long as you passively take on a predetermined code of ethics, you have no guarantee that you entirely believe in it, or for that matter will adhere to it.

### **Methodology**

You can now consider the more practical question of what actual technique or techniques you will choose to employ in order to put into practice the theoretical points above. How will you concretely be with your client? What method will you use that is consistent with the way in which you see life, life's problems, and counselling as a means to help solve those problems?

How do you proceed when a person comes to you for counselling - what rules do you observe to safeguard your quality of work? You will now be in a position to make a conscious decision about what methods you want to employ and which you don't want to employ - simply by matching them to the guidelines you have formulated for your own practices. So instead of blindly adopting a technique that seems attractive, you can critically examine the underlying implications of each method and technique and decide whether it is suitable for what you want to do. This implies that you will acquaint yourself with as many methods as possible - and that you will familiarize yourself with them - not only as far as their technicalities go, but specially in terms of their implied, philosophical stance. You will want to know the possible effect of each method on your own and the client's basic position and orientation in life.

If you do this at all seriously, it is unlikely that you will find any one method of counselling or therapy that suits you absolutely and exactly. Equally you will find that uncritical eclecticism is often even more dangerous, as it may rest on your desire not to examine the existential goal of the counselling work but get turned into applying various techniques that have a momentary appeal or that seem to promise quick results. Only if you know for what reasons you use those methods and what you expect to achieve by their use might you

responsibly combine them to suit your personal approach.

### **Evaluation**

As soon as you start working with clients and start applying all this, the problem of monitoring and evaluating your performance arises. From the above it follows that this evaluation should be focussed not primarily on your correct application of one or several techniques, but on your ability to put into practice what you esteem to be important and right. Rather than check whether you have made the right gestures with the client or spoken in the right tone of voice, you want to make sure whether you are conveying to the client those conceptions of life that you consider essential. You want to know whether you really leave the client free if freedom is the most important, or whether you are effective in encouraging self examination, if that seems the most important goal. Is your own attitude as a counsellor consistent with your idea of a healthy human being? Are you - at least in your profession - engaged in a meaningful and truthful way of being? Or perhaps more importantly: in what ways are you currently preventing such basic ethical consistency? In which ways do you observe your professional integrity?

When you start to train as a counsellor, these issues should be a priority. If you learn techniques from a perspective of general

clarity about your own assumptions, motivation and goals, you will be less likely to be confused - about the innumerable available methods and techniques. You will be able to separate what makes sense from what is nonsense and you will then proceed to acquire skills, as tools only, without allowing yourself to become a technician rather than a human being.

Your training and your practice as a counsellor will eventually lead you to become a more supple human being with a broader and more basic value system. This will however

only happen if and when you re-examine your philosophical stance and your own assumptions regularly and if you practice the above described philosophical evaluation of your own work. Without the commitment to clarity about your own views and goals, your influence on the client could become one-sided, and potentially harmful. As a responsible counsellor you will re-examine yourself and your life continuously. As a trainee counsellor, it will therefore be useful to start your career by a full survey of your personal and professional philosophy.

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