COUNSELLING AND SOCIAL WORK: LOOKING FOR A BETTER UNDERSTANDING

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Abstract

A logical categorisation of the dimensions of counselling in social work should bear in mind the fact that counselling skills are at the basis of all social work tasks, as well as the fact that counselling is a major explicit part of describing the social work activity.

Many social workers most likely cannot see where the place of counselling is. On the other hand, counsellors can be critical of the bureaucratic tasks of task focussing as part of social work. For some authors, the role of the social worker becomes that of a counsellor whenever the former endeavours to improve the client's capacity. Nevertheless, social work "often goes beyond counselling", because it enhances the resolution of problems and the help, which are "concrete, specific and focused". This dysfunction is important because it makes the difference between counselling skills focussing on an individual's emotional life and counselling skills focussing on solving the individual's problems and on practical aspects. Although counselling and social work can be guided by the same concepts and skills, and a trained social worker needs to be equipped at lest with the "basics of counselling", their aims can be different.

Key words: counselling, social work, empowerment, facilitation of changing, social services, abilities, competencies.

Counselling and development

Counselling is a development-oriented process of change through which an individual can reach a higher stage of personal competence. As a rule, counselling is done individually, within a couple or within a family, and it aims to develop more capable and more efficient individuals.

In the sense promoted by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, BACP, *counselling* is an action performed on a one-to-one basis or with several individuals at once, focussing on: personal growth, support during crisis situations, psychotherapeutic assistance, problem solving. The main purpose of the counselling effort is to provide for the client the opportunity to explore, discover and clarify ways for efficiently using resources – his/her own, family resources, community resources.

Often oriented towards helping clients understand and clarify their viewpoints on living space, on environment, counselling also supports learning how to find the determining purposes in order to understand the self and those around, to be better informed about opportunities, to solve emotional and interpersonal issues (Burks, Stefflre, 1979).

Therefore, an essential feature of counselling is that of *facilitating* understanding, change, acceptance of new situations, overcoming dramatic moments, personal integration and growth.

Scally and Hopson (1979) believe that counselling is just one way of helping. It is certainly not the universal answer to human troubles, but rather a way to help people clarify and achieve their own purposes. The authors distinguish six types of strategies for helping: a) *giving advice*: offering somebody one's own opinion about the best course of action from one's own perspective in the client's situation; b) *providing information*: giving somebody the information he/she needs in a particular situation, bearing in mind the fact that lack of information can make people powerless, whereas the provision of information can be of enormous help; c) *direct action:* doing something on behalf of someone or acting for somebody else's immediate interests; d) *learning*: helping somebody accumulate knowledge and skills; helping somebody acquire skills that can improve his/her situation; e) *changing the system*: influencing and improving the systems causing difficulties for certain individuals; this presupposes a concern fore organisational development, rather than for individual development; f) *counselling*: helping an individual explore a problem, clarify conflict issues and discovering alternatives for solving them, so that the decision as to the course of action belongs to that particular person; this is helping people help themselves.

There are interesting similarities and differences between strategies. Giving advice, information, acting directly, teaching, providing possible systems for recognising the best answers, results or solutions, are elements a social worker may use. In their position as „experts", social workers provide what they think is best, most useful for the individual seeking help. Counselling, on the other hand, stresses the fact that the individual in difficulty is the one dealing with resources. The counsellor does not offer solutions, but instead develops a relationship that allows the client to search for his/her own answers. This does not deny the need for special skills for helping and inter-relation, but it does suggest that experience does not make one an expert.

The aims of counselling can be phrased in the terms of a wish, reached, however, through means that are different form those of other intervention models. Mainly, counselling is not concerned with helping people make decisions, but rather with helping them make wise decisions. Thus, the aim of counselling would be *self-empowerment*, seen as an individual's ability to go through the following stages: 1) „I'm not happy with the way things go right now."; 2) „What I'd rather have/do is..."; 3) „What I should do in order to get there is..."; 4) „I've changed whatever I could, I've reached actions/terms I can't achieve. I'm happy with that."

Following the course of the clarifications given in the domain, we need to underline the counselling relationship's adherence to principles, characterised by the application of one or several philosophical and psychological theories and by the use of a set of communication skills, doubled by experience, intuition, other personal factors in supporting the client's concerns, problems and intimate aspirations (McLeod, 1998).

The levels of intervention during counselling are dictated by the results desired and often requested by the clients. Among these we can identify: increase in self understanding and in the understanding of others; producing a desired change; adapting to a situation that cannot be changed; liberation from feelings; examining options and choosing one; increasing the effectiveness of personal decision-making process. The identification of the aims of counselling can be found by going through essentially the same coordinates. For example, John McLeod (1998) highlights the following *aims of counselling*: perspicacity - rational control of feelings and actions; development of self-consciousness –

develops self-perception by comparisons to the others; self-acceptance – positive attitude to self, acceptance of criticism, or rejection; self-development and individualisation - development and the fulfilment of potential, integration; enlightenment; problem solving - learning how to look for solutions and finding as many of them as possible; acquiring social skills - maintaining eye contact, leading conversations, assertiveness and anger management; cognitive change - altering or removing irrational beliefs; behavioural change - altering or replacing maladaptive or destructive behaviour models; systemic change - introducing change in the way social systems work; development - working with the skills, conscience, knowledge that will help the client confront social inequalities; restitution or compensation - helping the client repair previous destructive behaviours.

The counselling activity may overlap at some point with that performed by other social field professionals, but its aim is to discourage dependence and subjectivity. Self control and the control of situations are promoted.

Bearing in mind the objective accepted by most authors in the domain – helping people help themselves – we underline the results desired and often requested by clients:

- increased self-understanding and understanding of surrounding situations;
- obtaining a change the way it is desired and felt;
- increased efficiency of personal decision-making processes;
- providing assistance for a decision and its confirmation;
- ability to change a situation;
- adjustment to a situation that cannot be changed;
- liberation from feelings;
- examining options and choosing one.

Sometimes the clients desire other results, which do not fit the counselling aims – information, new skills or practical help. All the results of intervention, however, have in common the concept of *change*. Thus, given any situation or problem, an individual has at least for possible strategies to choose from: changing the situation; adapting to the new situation; leaving the situation; developing means for living with that particular situation.

Summarising, counselling: may be short-term or long-term; it can be performed in an organised or in a private setting; it can overlap or it can take place simultaneously with medical practice or with welfare practice (Feltham, C., Dryden, W., 1993); it is a separate activity, taking place between individuals who accept the role of counsellor and of client, respectively; it is a service sought by individuals in distress, in a state of confusion; it offers a more disciplined and a more confidential relationship than a friendship; reduces the stigma more than other assistance relationships; benefits from diverse approaches, which can be adapted to multiple life situations.

Counselling, Terapy, Psychotherapy and Social Work

In the Anglo-Saxon literature, the term *counselling* is often used interchangeably with the term *therapy*. Often, the terms *counselling* and *psychotherapy* are mistaken one for another, as are *counselling* and *social work*, due to the use of shared basic techniques and theoretical models.

The differences between counselling and psychotherapy can be highlighted by referring to temporal orientation – counselling focuses on the present and the future, while psychotherapy starts with the past –, to the difficulty of the situation the client is in – counselling deals with healthy, willing clients, capable of making decisions, eager to make a change or to adapt to a situation that cannot be changed, who happen to be temporarily in a state or a situation that puts them in difficulty and that requires support for solving, a support they request.

Counsellors and therapists need mostly the same skills and tend to meet with similar groups of clients, although they are placed, from a cultural point of view, in separate territories.

Counselling and social work influence each other and are entwined in terms of abilities, knowledge and values, but they have different identities and training methods.

The place of counselling in social work is even more unclear than when it appeared, because there is not always a difference made between counselling abilities. Epstein illustrates a possible perspective: the practice of "enhancing" the client's knowledge and abilities concerns counselling, or may be called "therapy" or "case study", depending on the linguistic customs and on the preferences of a particular sector of the

providing system (Epstein, 1988). In the past, counselling was used interchangeably with casework (Pinker, 1990) or with any form of one-to-one work. The argument was that, in fact, case studies were reconstructed as counselling, a new and diverse trade developing very fast. This change was helped along by the development of care managers.

Seden (1999) appreciates that the relationship between counselling and social work has always been a complex and interactive one. Social workers trained in the '60-s and the '70-s focused of the psychodynamic principles of case study. Since then, social work has changed direction, embracing behaviourist and ecological theories, as well as a variety of practical methods. Through radial and Marxist approaches, the initial concerns connected to social inequality, injustice and social exclusion were recovered, despite resource constraints.

In some spaces (ex.: the United Kingdom) the case study seems to be less of a priority than the ideologies of empowerment and functionalism. The idea of therapeutic relationship seems to be subordinated to legislation priorities, to meeting the quality standards and basic values of social work. Some social workers can go so far as to say that focusing on the individual leads to pathologisation.

In the domain of social intervention we can identify overlaps in the activity of a *probation counsellor* with that of a social worker that provides counselling as a specialised service or just guides the client, in the form of a primary service.

There is a lasting lack of clarity concerning the borders between counselling and social work. At one extreme we have those who believe all the direct work of social services dealing with clients is counselling, while other social workers see counselling as a domain reserved for other professionals.

The realistic point of view is that the social worker, *in certain situations, takes on the role of counsellor*, and these counselling skills can be used in order to perform a multitude of social work tasks. Confusion does not help, therefore counselling elements included in the individualised plan must be distinct, clarified and openly contracted in relation to other actions provided.

We then see counselling in the education realm, through the curricular area stipulated by education plans and programmes. Also, in the

labour sector there are agencies that specialise in assisting individuals with difficulties, dilemmas, anxieties concerning employment. The services provided today by governmental organisations as well as nongovernmental ones include, amongst others: vocation orientation, training and professional retraining courses; assistance in eliminating stress and anxiety concerning the job market; support for making decisions concerning one's career.

Sometimes, departments within business centres and within various agencies try to provide, often for a fee, models of cover letters, of resumes and even of job applications.

Counselling in the health care sector is present by virtue of the very nature of the domain. From the usual medical assistance and supervision, to assisting people suffering from serious illnesses and traumas, acquired or genetically inherited, suffering from as-yet-incurable diseases called „cancer" and „AIDS" by the layman. Centres dealing in alternative and complementary medicine also use and promote some of the counselling techniques.

Counseling meaning in actual social work

In the Romanian legislation documents concerning social services, (Emergency Decree 68, Law no. 515, Emergency Decree 86) counselling is often mentioned under „primary services", as well as under „specialised services". This adds to the lack of clarity concerning the place and the role of counselling in the domain of social work. On the one hand, as primary service it is assumed that anyone can provide it − neighbours, family, members of the community − , that is to say no special training is needed, and on the other hand, as a specialised social service it requires specialised knowledge and practices.

The direction taken nowadays by counselling and counselling skills is to improve communication skills in service provision. A great part of social work consists of detailed or else very brief transactions between individuals, and counselling skills are the most precise instruments for a good communication. Often, a great part of the work focuses on marginalised, vulnerable or disadvantaged groups and individuals, therefore the above-mentioned abilities become crucial. A

reflective supervision of the practice and continued training are needed in order to maintain these skills (Seden, Janet, 1999).

In social work, the dominance of the case study is in competition with radical anti-discrimination approaches which require an ideological re-definition at the same time with a methodological one. At the same time, the profession has become wary of the psychoanalytic approach.

Janet Seden (1999) believes that in the '90-s the assertion that social work can identify itself with a value base, a legal mandate, rather than with a certain set of methods. It is thus impossible to judge the role of counselling in social work without taking into consideration the specific system of values and the competencies needed for the practice.

Exigences in counselling practices

Identifying the most effective approach in counselling is a constant concern of those providing this service. In response, we can hear voices that uphold the importance of taking over an appropriate *approach* in a particular case, and others that stress the importance of the *relationship* in any course of action. As a rule, each counsellor adopts a single theory or an eclectic approach. In the first category, the most frequently encountered methods and action principles originate in the psychodynamic tradition – Freudian, Jungian, Kleinian, of objectual relations –, from the humanist tradition – person-centred, gestaltist, transactional analysis –, or from the cognitive-behavioural one – behavioural, cognitive, rational-emotive. Besides these, we can see short-term interventions, focussing on a purpose, a problem (Reid), on reality (W. Glaser), or on narration.

Specific for the second category are Gerard Egan's integrative approach and A. Ivey's microskills approach.

Of the various "counselling schools", it is considered that five have had a particular influence in social work (Trevithick, 2000): client-centred counselling – sometimes called humanist or person-centred counselling; gender counselling; cognitive-behavioural counselling; psychodynamic counselling; eclectic and integrative counselling – which do not adhere to a single school of thought but instead combines various approaches.

Each counselling approach is an explicative framework, a conceptual scheme providing explanations for the client's concerns, for the aspects considered therapeutic, as well as a set of tasks to be fulfilled together, in the counselling cabinet and continued by the client outside this space.

Theory provides the counsellor with an explicative model for building hypotheses concerning problematic situations and in order to identify possible solutions, according to the client's needs. It has an impact on the way the client's communication is conceptualised, on the way professional ethics are applied, interpersonal relations are developed and the way the counsellor perceives himself/herself (Gladding, S., 1996). In the absence of a theoretical support, the counsellor operates haphazardly, ineffectively and dangerously.

The value of a theory is proven by the degree to which it offers explanations about what takes place during counselling and in the clients' real world. The Freudian theory retains, to a certain extent, its influence in the domain of personal social services, but the development of humanist psychology, through the work of Rogers (1951) and A. Maslow, as well as the magnitude of the "personal growth" movement, have brought back into the light elements of pathology encountered both in social work and in other domains. This movement was strengthened by Truax and Carkhuff's work, *Toward Effective Counseling and Psychotherapy: Training and Practice* (1967), which highlights the personality traits of a good counsellor: genuineness, empathy and non-possessive warmth.

Humanist psychology and one of the approaches it is associated with – the client-centred approach – have been an important part of the social work training curricula. Such an approach has given rise to controversies concerning the importance of this "therapeutic dyad", but it has always inspired new perspectives in social work. Throughout time, several schools of thought have influenced the nature of social work. On example would be the trend towards training multi-skilled social workers, capable of working with very diverse groups – children and families, the elderly, delinquents, mentally handicapped people –in institutions or in the community. However, in order to work with all these groups, social workers need basic knowledge, as well as counselling competencies.

The concern for the client

Concern for the client has always come first, despite these much-debated theoretical orientations. In this sense, a set of principles which have considerably influenced the theory and the practice of modern counselling belongs to Felix Biestek (1957):

a) individualisation – a principle underlining the uniqueness of each person the social workers encounters;

b) awareness of one's own feelings – highlighting the value of liberation from feelings such as jealousy, anger, hatred, for a more constructive life;

c) controlled emotional involvement – this principle reminds social workers that a too-strong identification with the individuals they meet in their profession is inappropriate, as is espousing a single perspective;

d) acceptance – this principle accentuates the importance of taking people as they are, with their strengths and weaknesses, of affirming their dignity and their innate values;

e) non-judgemental attitude – this is closely connected with acceptance, due to the fact that the social worker does not seek to establish innocence or guilt, but at the same time recognises the limits for accepting certain actions;

f) client's right to self-determination – the social workers are reminded that they should refrain from giving advice, and instead try to empower the client for exploring appropriate solutions;

g) confidentiality – as an uninfringeable principle, with the exception of minimal limitations.

Most counsellors are in agreement about the importance of the relationship with the client for the success of the sessions. Characterised by mutual *trust* and *respect*, by genuineness, a good relationship creates the security needed in order to uncover and explore the client's concerns. Too strong or too weak an involvement from the part of the counsellor are detrimental to the client.

A good counselling relationship, in which the counsellor proves empathic understanding, genuine concern and respect, helps the clients engage in an emotional liberation and in self-exploration, detach themselves from the fear of introspection, begin exploring various aspects

of the life situations they find themselves involved in, see the others and the world around differently, progress towards accepting themselves as a human beings, with frailties and imperfections, identify their own hidden resources and use them outside counselling sessions, improve their relationship in order to accomplish personal aims.

Some of the clients desire to acquire through counselling new skills, which they can then use in their everyday life. It is thought that the root of such success lies in the facilitation functions of the counselling relationship.

Counselling and current social work practice

At the time being, the term "counselling" is often used in inappropriate contexts, with meanings (common conversation, advice, warning, information about the paperwork needed in order to apply for state support etc.) that do not imply a practice that is knowledgeable. Negative effects didn't take long to appear, some specialists being shocked by the emergence o counselling – in fact, the emergence of a term, not of a practice.

In social work, counselling was done a disservice and was misunderstood: the word is often used without a clear meaning. This is reflected in many works, even official ones, which include counselling among the functions of social work, among its services – both primary and specialised – without providing a definition. Counselling, the same as social work, is not just a way of working. It includes several major thought and practice schools, with different theoretical starting points (Seden, 1999).

Certain busy practitioners could say they do not have the time to listen to people's needs, social work's mission being merely administrative and functional. Seden (1999) asserts, however, that good organisational and administrative skills are essential for the practice of social work, and that while the legal requirements may be the same:

♦ Busy individuals have a greater need for basic counselling skills/abilities in order to reach pure communication within the allotted time;

♦ The clients are entitled to voice their own needs and to be listened as an individual by someone who offers them respect and understanding and who is sensitive to their cultural particularities;

♦ The services provided should be accepted by the receivers and seen by the latter as relevant;

♦ Work plans made in a hurry and imposed to people are harmful in practice and decay quickly, and in the long term they are more expensive and less effective than a little time given to listening, checking and answering in the initial stages of the interview and of the assessment;

♦ Social work remains an activity in which inter-human transactions between the individuals who need assistance and the individuals who respond are very significant in contributing to the creation and preservation of positive results;

♦ The user and his/her resources, points of view and motivations should be in the centre of all social work activities to the same extent as are the legal and the ethical aspects of the practice.

It is important that the service user knows what he/she is going to be offered and the fundaments of the service provided, particularly ethical elements and values. Then, if social workers provide counselling to clients, they need to know at least the basics about the operation of various therapeutic schools. Otherwise, they cannot offer options to the user, nor can they choose the most helpful theoretical approach. Social workers may advice users, in certain cases, to think hard before entering a therapeutic process for which they may not be prepared.

The basic counselling skills a social worker should have include:

♦ Giving attention: active listening, non-critical acceptance;

♦ Paraphrasing, reflection, summarising and verification;

♦ Awareness of using certain types of questions with a minimum of promptness, using alternatives to questions;

♦ Empathic understanding, creating connections, speeding up change;

♦ Challenging, confrontation, working with the defensive;

- ◆ Selecting aims, problem solving, focussing techniques;
- ◆ Knowledge about one's own and the others' use of body language;
- ◆ Avoiding judgements and moralising answers;
- ◆ Awareness of limitations, structuring techniques, ability to say difficult things in a constructive way;
- ◆ Ability to provide feedback, defusing techniques, avoiding the creation or preservation of hostility.

These types of abilities are pointed out in works dealing with approaches in counselling and interviewing – Egan, Ivey, Nelson-JonesMultumesc frumos, Jacobs, Inskipp – as essential for the counselling process and for facilitating tasks such as: beneficial advice, assessment of community care, pre-interview, assessment of children and of assistance plans. They can be used in case management for groups of clients and in many other actions: at the office, at home, in institutions.

Other counselling strategies are used for helping individuals dependant on alcohol, food, tobacco, substances in general. Last but not least, we note a specialisation of an increasing number of organisations in the tragic aspects of life, in the needs of individuals going through traumatic events, through moments that disrupt the normal operation of social roles and of the individual's status. Counselling the victims of domestic violence, of natural calamities, of disasters, of divorce, of social aggressions such as kidnappings, of sexual aggression, require as many approaches, closely tied to the change in the social perception of marriage and of de facto cohabitation, to the redefinition of gender-specific roles, to the new behavioural models imposed in family life, to the new provisions of the law.

Social workers, through the work they perform, face the greatest part of these phenomena, and, what is more, in different frameworks. Each situation occurs in a different manner, includes specific combinations of issues and requires enhanced competencies in adapting and finding solutions at actional level. Therefore, social workers need interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks, algorithms for categorising the practical elements encountered during field work, as well as a multitude

of abilities and skills. The impact of counselling can be felt in increasingly numerous domains, some of which we have mentioned here.

That social workers need counselling skills and abilities is an accepted fact. However, the changes in the social workers' tasks does not support the idea of practising these skills in a pure form, but instead of using them as a method of working with people, as part of an orientation towards respect and empathy for the client, rather than as an aim in itself. Counselling competencies become thus a foundation of the practice in many social work departments.

The counselling model most used in training counsellors seems to be the Rogersian, client-centred one. The appeal of this model is however deceptive, because it seems to have an empirical basis, it is positive in its orientation and enhances the individuals' growth and development potential. Social workers, however, seem to prefer different approaches: while for some this orientation is the main method of work, for others this will make up the foundation skills for family therapy, while yet others will practise it, but merely calling it "a good interview". Experienced social workers will recognize, however, the need to use several approaches during a single interview.

Conclusion

A logical categorisation of the dimensions of counselling in social work should bear in mind the fact that counselling skills are at the basis of all social work tasks, as well as the fact that counselling is a major explicit part of describing the social work activity. The particular, probably unique, the challenge the social worker faces is to provide counselling a way that is integrated with a variety of other approaches throughout the entire activity with a given client, within the same interview (Brearley, 1991).

Many social workers most likely cannot see where the place of counselling is. On the other hand, counsellors can be critical of the bureaucratic tasks of task focussing as part of social work. When someone operates on two domains, the overlap in practical skills, shared values and knowledge is obvious, as is the difference given by fulfilling professional and ethical mandates.

For some authors, the role of the social worker becomes that of a counsellor whenever the former endeavours to improve the client's capacity. Nevertheless, social work "often goes beyond counselling", because it enhances the resolution of problems and the help, which are "concrete, specific and focused". This dysfunction is important because it makes the difference between counselling skills focussing on an individual's emotional life and counselling skills focussing on solving the individual's problems and on practical aspects.

Although counselling and social work can be guided by the same concepts and skills, as Pamela Trevithick's book (2000) confirms, and a trained social worker needs to be equipped at lest with the "basics of counselling", their aims can be different. From this point of view, it is necessary to formulate clearly our aims, our professional borders and the confidentiality implications of our work (Seden, 1999).

It is especially important to recognize the times when we have to explore emotional problems that do not belong to the primary role of the social worker. The aims of counselling, as identified by McLeod (1998) have the role to clarify many things because they cover many social work domains.

Oftentimes, the social worker is in a difficult position when trying to provide services in a limited time. A concrete strategy is needed in order to develop social services, an approach beyond the basic needs of the individual in difficulty. We could ask whether this would be an specific activity to social work ? In order to prevent dependency and diminish it, it would be. Then, this social work oriented towards development could be realized precisely by learning, together with the clients, the way of identifying and using one's own resources – not only material, but personal as well: skills, knowledge, abilities, competencies. Counselling services provided with professionalism will help them leave behind the status of helpless person, they will encourage them to identify solutions on their own, to become independent individuals.

We cannot overlook one of the functions of counselling, that of *facilitating* understanding, change, the acceptance of new situations, the overcoming of dramatic moments, integration and personal development.

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