

The Choreography of Counseling

Sterling K. Gerber

Eastern Washington University

And

William W. Purkey

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

True ease in counseling comes from art, not chance, as those move easiest who have
learned to dance.

Alexander Pope (paraphrased)

Abstract

From a combination of principles of Invitational Counseling (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996) and Responsive Therapy (Gerber, 1986), the authors provide an analogy for the structure of counseling by comparing it to the choreography of dance. After briefly reviewing other structures (scientific process and medical-delivery procedure) the authors present an alternative an advanced art form: the choreography of counseling. In professional counseling, as in a dance performance, there is the introduction, the exploration, the exposition, and the resolution. Principles and techniques are given for success in each of the four stages.

The Choreography of Counseling

Introduction

Counseling can be viewed as a scientific process, a medical delivery procedure, or as an advanced art form. Each of these three viewpoints carries advantages as well as limitations.

Scientific Process

Building a scientific base for counseling has been both rewarding and frustrating. Like other scientific applications, isolating factors to study them risks their distortion or difficulty in generalizing back into their applied context. The myriad variables involved in any therapeutic approach, the great number of differing approaches to counseling, and the limitations caused by pragmatic and ethical issues make the interpretation of counseling as a scientific process a daunting task. At the same time, counseling is a "young science" and, as such, its dynamics require continued redefinition, testing and refinement: hallmarks of the scientific process.

Medical Procedure

When framed as a medical-delivery procedure, counseling techniques or approaches are used with clients whereby careful records are kept as to pre-morbid and post-morbid conditions. When sufficient change is recorded in a pre- and post-assessment format with a single client, curative power is imputed to the approach. When the same or greatly similar approaches demonstrate an expected change across many clients, an "if...then" case is made for the power of the approach to produce desired changes.

Much of counseling, historically, is based on a medical model, one of diagnosis and application of categorical treatment. Applying a medical procedure model to professional

counseling is, at best, a state of being unfinished, as witnessed by the frequent revision of diagnostic guidelines.

Advanced Art Form

Counseling as an advanced art form has not been a popular way of looking at therapeutic dynamics, yet it may hold some valuable insights into professional helping. The validation of art tends toward the mystical: whatever evolves as "good" is verified by artists.

In comparing counseling to an advanced art form, Purkey and Schmidt (1996) referred to Ginger Rogers, the beautiful Hollywood dancer who, in a response to an observation that she made dance look easy, said, "That's why it's magic." The seemingly effortless performance of an accomplished dancer understates the painstaking effort, personal discipline, and intentionality that are required for a good performance; the same can be said for professional counseling.

Borrowing from dance, the following is a broad conceptualization of the choreographed movements of therapy. Dancers talk of "blocking out" the performance; i.e., separating the final performance into stages: (1) the introduction (including staging, props, costumes), (2) the exploration of themes, (3) the exposition of the plot, and (4) the resolution of tensions. Counseling lends itself to these four stages.

The Introduction

Variables important to the introduction include the setting, the attitude or philosophy of the therapist, and the facilitative or inhibitive nature of the environment. Seasoned counselors take into account the importance of the total environment.

One model which focuses on dynamics of the introduction is Invitational Counseling (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996). By careful analysis of the people, policies, processes, places, and programs involved in any human environment, the counselor can create an introductory setting which is sensitive, humane, caring, and ethically appropriate.

An intentionally inviting introduction for counseling is based on four assumptions:

1. Clients are able, valuable, capable of self-direction, and should be treated accordingly.
2. Counseling is a cooperative, collaborative alliance in which process is as important as product.
3. Clients possess relatively untapped potential in all areas of worthwhile human endeavors.
4. This potential can best be realized by places, policies, and programs that are intentionally designed to invite development, and by counselors who consistently seek to realize this potential in their clients and themselves.

Without drawing attention to its dynamics, the intentionally inviting counselor communicates to the client:

1. You are important; nothing else at this time is of greater consideration than you and your concerns.
2. The processes you are to encounter are user-friendly, and you will be treated in a respectful manner.

3. There is every reason to believe that you have the resources to find ways to handle your concerns.

From an artistic viewpoint, the introduction carries important messages about the dynamics of the performance. Aspects established in the introduction stage are continued throughout the "dance."

The Exploration

The exploration stage in artistic pieces may be relatively brief or it may encompass the major time and energy of the work. Historically, therapists devoted incredible amounts of time to exploration--even hundred of sessions. From the viewpoint of aiding in major personality change, there may be merit in the use of prolonged work with a therapist, but under contemporary constraints of managed health care and third-party payments, an economically motivated mandate of ten sessions or fewer per client is the rule. The task the counselor faces is to allow time for the exploration stage and, at the same time, preserve enough time for exposition and resolution.

One counseling approach, Responsive Therapy (Gerber, 1986), prescribes approximately three one-hour sessions for exploration. This typically provides enough time to arrive at a definition of client circumstance and style. Responsive Therapy casts the client in the disclosing role with studious avoidance of restrictions to that role. The client is the highest authority on himself or herself, while the counselor is the expert on communication dynamics.

Through precise and skilled use of communication skills, the counselor invites the client to disclose progressively more definitive, more complete descriptions of the unique circumstances faced by, and as experienced by, the client. In addition, the client is summoned cordially to disclose means for resolution that have been tried unsuccessfully. These efforts reveal the problem-solving style most relied on by the client. Clients evolve in their awareness and their

responsiveness as they learn from telling their stories more completely and more thoroughly than anyone has ever invited them to do so before.

One important dynamic of the exploration stage as advocated both by Responsive Therapy and Invitational Counseling is the studious avoidance of questioning by the therapist. Questions create an interaction dynamic whereby the client is required to provide information to fit into the thinking pattern of the therapist. This works nicely with scientific processes and medical models; it works terribly if client understanding is the goal.

By relying on indirect leads, furthering responses, paraphrases, reflections, and careful inferences, the counselor can more nearly enter into the perceptual world of the client. Most clients will disclose more quickly and more completely when invited to describe themselves and their conditions without interrogation (i.e., Counselor: "Tell me about yourself." Client: "What do you want to know?" Counselor: "Whatever you want to disclose.") The initial sessions are time for client ventilation and testing by the client of the therapeutic milieu.

The counselor's skill in eliciting explicit disclosure during the exploration stage facilitates a clear vision on the part of both the counselor and client of the unique client circumstance and style. This permits cooperation in the identification or selection of the desired outcomes of intervention, intentionality in the selection of intervention strategies, and partnership of client and counselor in achieving those outcomes.

The Exposition

Unlike ballet, which is scripted to a predetermined outcome, but very much like improvisation in extemporary dance forms, counseling provides for strategies to rewrite the final act. The

revision in the script is made possible by the counselor's understanding and following the client's circumstance and style, again without interrogation.

Responsive Therapy and Invitational Counseling recommend focusing on the perceptual world of the client, as a foundation for choosing interventions with a high probability of success. Near the end of the second or third interview, the counselor may share with the client his or her perception of what is going on (client circumstance) and of how the client is trying to deal with these circumstances (client style). Upon verification by the client as to the accuracy of the description, the counselor identifies intervention options and makes recommendations for proceeding to the resolution phase. At this juncture, either a formal or a soft contract may be made which defines the type of intervention, probable time frame, and anticipated outcomes.

The Resolution

Blocking out the resolution phase is a matter of knowing the dynamics of change required to accomplish the client's goals. By carefully blocking out or orchestrating this phase of counseling, the counselor may be more efficient in selecting the strategy most tailored to the unique situation and style of the client.

A casual overview of professional approaches to counseling suggests that most are worded as though they cover the entire counseling process, yet their focus tends to be strongly on only one or two of the phases just elaborated. Major differences are accounted for by a thorough analysis of one of the phases, with a more superficial treatment of the others. In the language of Invitational Counseling, the most professional approach is to be intentionally inviting in each phase.

By emphasizing the choreography of counseling, the professional helper blends the four aspects of counseling--introduction, exploration, exposition and resolution--into a seamless whole. At its best, the choreography of counseling becomes invisible. To borrow from the writing of Chuang-tse, an ancient Chinese philosopher, the choreography of counseling should "flow like water, reflect like a mirror, and respond like an echo." In its purest form, professional counseling, like the choreography of the dance, remains unseen. The dancer and the dance become one.

References

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Dr. Sterling K. Gerber is a Professor in the Department of Applied Psychology at Eastern Washington University, Cheney, Washington. Dr. William W. Purkey is a Professor in the Department of Counseling and Educational Development at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, North Carolina. Inquiries should be addressed to Dr. Gerber.