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Burnett, Paul C. (1998) *What do clients learn from counselling: A content analysis*. In: Guidance and counselling : challenge the futures: proceedings of the International Conference of the Queensland Guidance and Counselling Association, 1998, 17-20 September 1998, Australia, Queensland, Brisbane.

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What do Clients Learn from Counselling?: A Content Analysis

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This presentation outlines the results of a study in which thirty-five clients who had received or were receiving counselling completed a letter to a friend which asked them to describe in as much detail as possible what they had learned from counselling. Thirteen of these clients also agreed to be interviewed. The contents of the participants' written and oral responses were analysed using a content analysis approach. The analysis indicated that the data was best categorised in terms of three broad areas of learnings (Self, Relations with Others, and the Process of Learning and Change). The Self taxonomy consisted of six hierarchical category levels. The Relations with Others taxonomy consisted of five hierarchical levels. The Process of Learning and Change taxonomy consisted of five hierarchical levels. During this presentation the results of the research will be presented and discussed. This will be followed by small groups of participants being given a client's transcript to classify using the three taxonomies.

After decades of individual studies, meta-analytic studies, and syntheses of meta-analytic studies, the positive outcomes associated with counselling are evident and further investigations focussing on assessing the efficacy of counselling have little new to offer. The decreasing trend over the past decade in the counselling outcome studies reported in the literature (Hill, Nutt, & Jackson, 1994; Sexton, 1996) would suggest that researchers have become increasingly dissatisfied with the methods used to conduct traditional outcome research and their products.

Qualitative Counselling Outcomes Studies

Generally, those few studies that have employed alternative qualitative research methodologies in the counselling area have tended to be process investigations that measure what happens in sessions in terms of therapist and client behaviours, the interactions between them, and how change comes about (Hill, 1982; Hill & Corbett, 1993). Consequently, as the counselling moves on from establishing its efficacy, and as it seeks to develop new paradigms of outcome research, methodological diversity appears to be essential. Despite the apparent need for change, and the assertions by various researchers that the counselling field is ready for a change from its reliance on the traditional methodologies (Goldman, 1989), it has been noted that counselling's body of knowledge, as displayed in major research journals, lacks methodological diversity (Polkinghorne, 1991).

Counselling Outcomes in the Context of a Learning Framework

Counsellors generally agree on the importance of learning (unlearning, relearning, new learning) in counselling contexts (Strupp, 1986), with the two major outcomes of counselling involving (a) clients learning to deal with situations differently and more productively in the short term, and (b) transferring what they have learned to subsequent problem situations rather than returning to counselling each time a difficult situation arises. Thus, one goal of counselling is the development of skills for lifelong learning by assisting clients to learn how to cope with difficult situations that are encountered throughout the passage of life.

Outcome research has not been conceptualized within this framework but instead has focused on the assessment of behaviour change in the short term, rather than assessing more long term learning characterized by personal growth and development (Steenbarger & Smith, 1996). Quantitatively assessing counselling outcomes using measures of short term behaviour change, such as symptom removal, may not reliably reflect the therapeutic learning that impacts most on client well being, or the changes that are unique and specific to individual clients (House, 1996; Steenbarger & Smith, 1996). Thus, there is a need to develop new and innovative methods that are consistent with conceptualizations about counselling and that reliably assess counselling outcomes.

The psycho-educational learning literature appears to have the potential to provide a reliable framework for assessing counselling learning outcomes. Saljo (1979) identified five distinctly different conceptions of learning: (1) an increase of knowledge, (2) memorizing, (3) acquisition of facts to be retained and/or utilized in practice, (4) the abstraction of meaning, and (5) an interpretive process aimed at understanding reality. More recently, Marton Dall'Alba and Beaty (1993) in a longitudinal study asked students their view about learning and found support for the five conceptions identified by Saljo as well as detecting a sixth conception: (6) changing as a person. Marton et al. made an important distinction between the first three conceptions and the second three conceptions of learning with regard to the role of "meaning". The first three conceptions indicate that knowledge learned is something ready-made and pre-existing, and the notion of meaning is absent. However, in the second three conceptions, the learner engages knowledge to create meaning, understanding, and new knowledge and perspectives.

The role of learning in counselling has been recognized and has been considered to be a factor that is common across therapies, but has tended to be conceptualized as a process associated with positive outcomes rather than a desired outcome itself (Lambert, 1986). To date, a method for assessing the learnings resulting from counselling has not been forthcoming and given that the enhancement of learnings would appear to be a primary goal of counselling, the assessment of those learnings would appear to have some merit. A learning outcomes approach which assesses what clients have learned may also have implications for counselling practice, such as teaching clients to learn from counselling and/or modifying counselling to ensure maximum client learning (Martin, 1984). Thus, it is proposed that a framework that describes learning outcomes in terms of what has been learned from counselling is a new, innovative and functional approach for counselling outcomes and efficacy research.

Aim of the Study

This study examined the question of "What has been learned from counselling?". The previous work of Saljo (1979) and Marton et al. (1993) provided the theoretical framework by which hierarchical taxonomies will be developed in those areas of clients' lives where counselling has had an impact. The focus of this exploratory study was on investigating how hierarchical taxonomies could be developed as a viable method for assessing the content of what clients have learned from counselling.

Method

Participants

The participants were individuals who had received counselling in recent months for a variety of reasons ranging from personal difficulties to couple and relationship difficulties. Thirty-five individuals participated in the written response component of the study (5 males, 30 females). The age range of the participants was 19 to 65 years of age with a mean age of 36 years. No other background data was obtained from the clients, the counsellor's or the counselling situation given that the specific focus of the study was on developing a method to assess clients' learnings irrespective of the context.

Materials

All participants were asked to write a letter to a friend describing in as much detail as possible what they learned and how they gained or benefitted from counselling. This procedure has been described and used previously in the learning literature (Tang & Biggs, 1995; Trigwell & Prosser, 1990) but not used in the counselling context.

Procedure

Five mental health agencies that provide counselling services for relationship or personal issues agreed to facilitate access to their clients. All clients were asked by their counsellors to participate in the study after their second or subsequent visit and were given an envelope which contained an introductory letter, the open-ended response proforma (letter to a friend), and a free post return envelope if they responded in the affirmative.

Analysis

The written responses were transcribed and were analysed by investigating the content of the responses. The content of each transcript was examined and the text of each transcript was broken into meaning units of single ideas expressed by the respondents in a word, sentence or paragraph. Each meaning unit was transcribed to an individual card with each participant's identification code noted on the back. A descriptive word or phrase which summarized the content of the meaning unit was then written on the card above the word, sentence or paragraph. These descriptive words and phrases were then grouped according to similarity to form content categories. The content categories were then grouped into areas. Each of the content categories within the areas formed a taxonomy and were allocated a position within an ascending hierarchy in terms of the quality of the learnings using Marton et. al's (1993) facts versus meaning dichotomy with higher levels representing the integration of knowledge and higher order thinking.

Results

The analysis of the content revealed that the data was best categorized as three broad learning taxonomies (Self, Relations with Others, and the Process of Learning and Change) each consisting of hierarchical category levels which detail the quality of the learnings gained. See Table 1.

Table 1
Content indicators for each level within the three learning outcomes areas of Self, Relations with Others, and the Process of Learning and Change.

SELF

Level	Level Descriptor	Level Indicators
SL0	No Learning	Nothing has been learned in this area: no mention is made about self.
SL1	Survival and Basic Coping	Surviving or knowing will survive; having a sense of hope for the future (eg "light at the end of the tunnel"); regain basic necessities of life (eg experience happiness, self rights, love, personal value, stability, self-worth); feeling normal; coping or knowing will cope; beginning to heal; "getting by"; still alive.
SL2	Self Awareness and Self Acceptance	Insight; self-discovery; self awareness; self acceptance; awareness of new/different aspects/perspectives of the self (eg inner child, layers of the self, illogical vs rational self, emotional vs thinking self); awareness and/or acceptance of the positive aspects of the self and/or personal strengths and/or achievements; awareness and/or acceptance of personal weaknesses (eg denial, self-doubt, self fulfilling prophecies, fears, poor coping strategies); understanding that self change is possible; awareness and/or acceptance of the specific aspects of the self that may need to be worked on/changed; awareness, and/or acceptance of feelings/emotions/moods, and/or thoughts/cognitions/motives, and/or behaviours/actions/reactions; ownership of thoughts and/or feelings and/or actions; understanding of the impact that past and present personal experiences can have on feelings, thoughts, behaviours, and/or current problems.
SL3	Personal Change	Positive self change; improvement in areas of personal weakness; decrease in and Improvement negative "symptoms" (eg stress, tension, depression); changed thoughts/cognitive processes (eg thinking through things before acting, not jumping to conclusions, not worrying about the past, not denying memories, rectifying incongruencies between thoughts and reality, self thoughts/concepts); management/regulation/ appropriate expression of feelings/emotions; change in behaviours/actions/reactions (eg assertive, self expression, slowing down, dealing with issues one at a time, improved communication with inner self; balancing time spent on issues, changed priorities); dealing effectively with loss; dealing effectively with uncontrollable intrinsic factors (eg medical conditions, learning problems); effective coping; personal change experience in a specific life area (eg academic).
SL4	Personal Growth and Development	Development of opinions, values, beliefs and/or attitudes; sense of personal growth and enrichment; growth in maturity; change in self identity; development of personal strength; development/regaining spirituality; positive authentication of self; positive life outlook; greater self confidence; higher self-esteem; greater independence and/or motivation.
SL5	Personal World View	Found place in the world; sense of destiny, know what want out of life: "in tune" with the world; world now has a different focus: new understanding/perspectives about the world/life, in control of life directions.

RELATIONS WITH OTHERS

Level	Level Descriptor	Level Indicators
RL0	No Learning	Nothing has been learned in this area; no mention is made about relationships with others.
RL1	Awareness and Acceptance of Others	Insight/awareness and acknowledgement of another person's thoughts/cognitive processes, and/or behaviours/actions/ reactions, and/or feelings/emotions, and/or point of view; forgiveness; acceptance that other people can change.
RL2	Insight into Relations with Others	Awareness and/or acceptance that each person in a relationship must commit to the relationship and/or have maintenance role; awareness and/or acknowledgement that all people in a relationship have individual strengths, weaknesses and differences; awareness and/or acceptance that more than one person may need to change; understanding the importance of a relationship; understanding dysfunctional relationships; awareness of the impact of the self on other people's thoughts, feelings and behaviours; awareness of how self and other interact and react; awareness and/or acceptance that cannot make others adapt/change.
RL3	Self as Responsive but not Responsible for Others	Not solely responsible for problems and difficulties experienced in relationships with other individuals; not responsible for other people; not responsible for other people's thoughts and/or feelings and/or actions; can be responsive to, supportive and encouraging of other individuals but not responsible for them.
RL4	Change and Growth of Relationships	Improvement in a relationship/s; changed communication and relationship skills (eg dealing effectively with disagreements/ problems/ conflict); effective coping with behaviour and/or thoughts and/or feelings of other people.

THE PROCESS OF LEARNING AND CHANGE

Level	Level Descriptor	Level Indicators
PL0	No Learning	Nothing has been learned in this area; no mention is made about how to change or the need to change.
PL1	Insight into the Nature of Learning and Change	Gradual and step-like; some learning/changes may be immediate whereas other changes take longer; may be setbacks; some things are unchangeable (eg the past); perfection is not possible; continued effort is required to maintain change; the extent of change is related to the amount of effort; learning and change may come from hardship; accept that some changes are inevitable; learning/change may be lifelong.
PL2	Knowledge of Skills that Facilitate Learning and Change	Willing to change; acceptance that seeking temporary help and support may be necessary at times (eg counselling, friends/ family); importance of objectivity (eg within self, professional help); ability to clarify/identify/confront a problem and/or the related/hidden issues/factors; ability to put problems into perspective; importance of developing and working towards goals.
PL3	Understanding of	Awareness and acceptance that decisions/answers to problems come from

the Self as a Change Agent	within the self; awareness and acceptance of self as responsible for the choices made; awareness and acceptance that must help yourself if you want to change; accept outcomes; self evaluation rather than evaluation/approval from others; awareness and acceptance that others do not have the answers.
PL4 Generalisation of Learning and Change Processes	Ability to apply change/learning processes that have been learned in the counselling setting and/or for a specific area or problem, to other life areas (eg. relationships, work, study) and/or problems in the future; ability to effectively deal with/ manage problems outside of counselling sessions; ability to look at any situation and realise the correct path to change.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate what clients learned from counselling using a content analysis approach. A further aim was to see if the quality of what had been learned could be classified hierarchically using taxonomies based on the conceptions of learning developed by Saljo (1979) and Marton et al. (1993). The three taxonomies which emerged from the data are hierarchical with the upper levels indicating more advanced learnings. However, the transition from facts to meaning as described by Marton et al. (1993) did not clearly emerge from the analysis but the emphasis on developing meaning, understanding, and on integrating knowledge into a broader or more abstract context is more evident as the hierarchy levels increase. The higher levels in each of the taxonomies do indicate that higher order thinking skills are being utilised. It should be noted the taxonomies are developmental in nature indicating that clients who are categorized in the higher levels are assumed to have moved through the lower levels.

The three areas that emerged from the analysis of content are very general and would appear to be therapeutic goals that all counsellors would value irrespective of their clients' presenting problems or the counsellor's approach. Consequently, the taxonomies appear to have utility across the various problem areas and diagnostic categories. Also the three areas are independent of each other indicating that the attainment of a high level on one hierarchy does not necessarily mean that high levels on the other hierarchies will be present. Once counsellors are trained in assessing their client's learning level in the three areas they would be able to plot an individual profile for clients and match it to their treatment goals.

Future research is needed to test the robustness of the taxonomies on a larger sample of clients. This will be made easier by the fact that the training process for counsellors to classify clients will be able to include actual examples of responses for each of the taxonomies. If the taxonomies are found to be stable and clients are easily able to be classified by counsellors, then this approach may have implications for the process of counselling. It may well be that to maximise the learnings, counsellors need to use strategies and techniques to enhance their clients' learning. These strategies would not replace the counselling approaches and techniques used by counsellors but would be an adjunct or overlay to counselling.

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