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PRINCIPLES OF GROUP COUNSELING
AND THEIR APPLICATIONS FOR DEAF CLIENTS

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Abstract

According to a model developed by Cavanagh (1982), counseling may be perceived as a unique relationship by which the counselor helps others learn to relate to themselves and others in growth-producing ways. The effective counselor fosters growth by creating an environment and a relationship that is significantly different from any presently experienced by the client or clients.

Underlying principles and goals of individual and group counseling are identified and discussed. One goal of counseling is to help individuals understand that most of their difficulties emanate from within themselves and not from external circumstances. The basic purposes of a therapeutic group are to increase people's knowledge of themselves and others, to assist people in clarifying changes they want to make in their lives, and to help them develop some of the tools necessary to make the changes.

Special characteristics of members of the Deaf culture are discussed, with implications for the group counseling process. The identification of ASL as the language of choice has great importance for the Deaf community and any effective counselor must accept it as a legitimate language distinct from English. The counselor must resist any attempt to pathologize deafness and needs to recognize it as an identifying characteristic of a distinct American social group.

The utilization of interpreters with counselors not proficient in ASL is considered. Because the presence of a third party in the counseling process entails distancing in the counselor/client relationship, it is preferable to have a counselor skilled in ASL. Because of a shortage of such professionals, the use of an interpreter may be the only viable alternative.

Introduction

Counseling in a general sense refers to a unique relationship between a counselor or therapist and an individual who seeks help in which both the skills of the helper and the atmosphere that he or she creates helps people understand themselves and relate to others in more growth-producing ways (Cavanagh, 1982, p.1.). Counseling can be very useful and productive both for those who are experiencing difficulties in their lives and for those who are not. It provides an opportunity in a safe and supportive environment for individuals to explore their thoughts, feelings and behavior patterns as well as the range of choices available to them.

The common element in all approaches to counseling and psychotherapy is the emphasis on change. Therapists may view the definition of the change differently, but most would agree that clients bring themselves to therapy because they have determined that something in their life must be changed. The element needing change may involve behavior, personal feelings, interpersonal interaction styles, jobs, relationships, or a variety of qualities, emotions, or situations.

The atmosphere created in the counseling setting must be different in significant ways from the everyday environment in which the individual functions if the counseling process is to facilitate growth. The counselor's responses must also be different from those which individuals have received in other aspects of their lives. Counseling will not effectively serve the needs of clients if it merely repeats previous ineffective advice, warnings, encouragement, and feedback that have been provided by parents and significant others. For example, it may not be helpful for a counselor to rush in with "comfort" to relieve anxiety or depression if similar attempts by others have been unsuccessful. Such attempts will not be successful merely because they are performed by a trained counselor. Cavanagh (1982, p.11) has captured the essence of counseling by posing the following two

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questions:

1. How can I be a qualitatively different significant other to this person?
2. How can I create an environment—a relationship—that is significantly different from any presently experienced by this person?

Counseling in any of its forms and with its various therapeutic approaches has the goal of helping individuals understand that most of their personal difficulties emanate from unresolved conflicts within themselves and not from external situations to which they may attribute their difficulties. Cavanagh (1982) has argued that the source of the vast majority of problems people bring into counseling resides in the person's personality and he states that most interpersonal difficulties "...are externalized manifestations of internal conflicts" (p.12).

Although group counseling is a unique therapeutic form, it is embedded firmly within the fundamental bases of general therapeutic counseling principles. There are three purposes to this paper. First is the explication of general assumptions and principles of counseling. Second is the consideration of specialized principles and practices within the area of group counseling. Third and finally is the application of these principles to a group of clients with unique characteristics and communication needs, i.e. profoundly deaf clients who communicate primarily through sign.

General Principles of Counseling

Assumptions About Individuals

Some basic assumptions can be made about the human condition. We all will face stress in our daily lives and during periods of transition from one stage of life to another. In addition to dealing with financial crises, illness, and death of loved ones, the strains of normal life events are always with us. Counseling can provide support for dealing with the pressures of daily life events as well as for handling crises (Gazda, 1971).

A poorly understood assumption of the counseling process is the fact that the effective counselor does not—and cannot—make changes for the client. The client must discover the behavioral changes necessary to lessen anxiety or depression or to reduce conflicts that are damaging. The client has the right and the responsibility to consider the choices that are available to all of us and to make decisions about these choices. The counselor

serves as the facilitator of the process, but the agent of change is always the client, who makes the ultimate decision for change and who implements it.

Cavanagh (1982) has identified three major factors that are at the core of most internal conflicts that can interact with environmental situations. These interactions can give the appearance that they are embedded within the situation itself when in fact they are grounded within the individual's patterns of behavior and thought. Cavanagh labels these internal factors as:

1. Negative self-appraisal
2. Psychological imperatives
3. Conflicting needs

Negative self-appraisal has also been referred to as low self-esteem or negative self-concept. Individuals with strong negative self-appraisals spend undue time and emotional energy fighting with, or fleeing from others and situations. This fight or flight response pattern causes additional complicating problems. Persons with a negative self-appraisal may retain the perception that the problem is within the environment and not within the self, thus freeing them of the responsibility of focusing on their own behavior.

Psychological imperatives are the so-called "musts" that restrict our options and contribute to the establishment of such unattainable goals as perfection, total "niceness" and perpetual interpersonal harmony. Ideally we may want ourselves and our world to be trouble free, but we must realize that we, our relationships, and our environment are imperfect.

The existence of conflicting needs is common to all of us. We all experience the conflict between needs of independence versus dependence, believing versus doubt, altruism versus selfishness and intimacy versus safety. Usually we adapt to these opposing forces. The key is to deal with these conflicts effectively without allowing them to interfere unduly with our ability to conduct the affairs of life.

Understanding the basic internal factors of negative self image, psychological imperatives and conflicting needs and how they contribute to personal and interpersonal difficulties can be a new and liberating experience for many people. Such understanding can relieve them of the burden of believing that they have a personality defect that cannot be changed. Once they see how their behavior interacts with the environment they can begin to

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understand that they are not helpless victims of circumstances.

When effective, counseling supports people and allows them to learn to deal more effectively with reality. As Cavanagh (1982, p.155) states, the bottom line task of the counselor is to help the client understand that no event *per se* causes psychological disaster and that the individual has constructive alternatives for responding to even the most traumatic situations.

Group Counseling

Although the milieu may be different from individual counseling and offer some therapeutic possibilities not available during individual sessions, the essential nature of therapeutic goals is not changed in the group format. As Corey and Corey (1982, p.3) state, the basic purposes of a therapeutic group are to increase people's knowledge of themselves and others, to assist people in clarifying the changes they most want to make in their lives, and to help them develop some of the tools they need to make these changes. The group process offers guided interactions between and among members and the leader in a safe and supportive environment. Growth is stimulated in the group environment mainly through each member's interaction with others in the group. The goal is achieving individual and common goals that are complementary and not in conflict, i.e. developing a sense of independence while at the same time establishing a shared, mutually accepted, interdependence with other members of the group. Anderson (1984, p.1) stresses the benefits of the symbiotic growth of independence and interdependence by stating, "the assumption is that learning to live differently and to grow inside the group can be transferred to living differently and growing in one's life outside of the group."

An advantage of group counseling is that it provides members the opportunity to share common experiences, receive a variety of perspectives, approximate real-life interpersonal encounters and test newly developed behaviors in a closed, supportive environment before applying them outside of the group setting (Jacobs, Harvill, & Masson, 1988; Yalom, 1985). A group member can receive honest feedback from other members which enables the individual to learn how he or she really appears to others, an appearance which may be at odds with the individual's own self-appraisal.

Before such honest and helpful interaction can be realized, the group, of course, must work through some stages in which some members of the group might experience heightened degrees of anxiety. Corey and Corey (1982, p.122) attribute such anxiety largely to fears of looking foolish, of losing control, of being misunderstood, of being rejected, and of not knowing what is expected. Anxiety is reduced to the extent to which members are able to learn to trust each other and to share concerns, feelings, and thoughts openly without fear of rejection or humiliation. Anxiety and fear decrease as members begin to rely on their own resources for support and start to have more realistic expectations of themselves and others, so that criticism from other group members is facilitative, not devastating.

Counseling and Culture

Certain general characteristics of the counseling process tend to reflect critical characteristics of the majority American population. There are two major characteristics which, if not addressed appropriately by the counselor, can impede the counseling process. Sue (1981) has noted that the emphasis on verbal communication and the use of standard English reflects the preferences of the majority culture. This language variable can have far reaching effects upon individuals who do not use standard English. Although Sue's observations were restricted to hearing clients, the implications for Deaf clients with ASL as their preferred language should be obvious.

Sue (1981) emphasizes the culture bound values that lie within the foundations of counseling. These include: encouragement of expressiveness within verbal, emotional and behavioral spheres; general communication patterns from the client to the counselor; the placement of high value on openness and intimacy; the establishment of a distinction between mental and physical wellness; and the incorporation of a cause and effect approach relying on analytical, linear, verbal reasoning. Again, the implications of majority cultural assumptions being applied to counseling with individuals who identify with Deaf culture can be enormous.

Sue (1981) reports that much of the research supports the contention that race and/or cultural similarity between the counselor and client is important, thus implying that a competent counselor who comes from the same cultural, class or racial background as the client would greatly facilitate the counseling process. However, this is not always possible. In such cases, the counselor must

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develop a level of trust by demonstrating an awareness of the client's cultural values, linguistic preferences and unique experiences. Hall (1976) stresses that in reality we are not all the same under the skin in every way; we come from unique and varied cultures and hold different interpretations of these cultures. Sue (1981) reinforces this by arguing "the failure to recognize true differences in thought among groups of people leads us to a well-meaning but false sense of humanism and brotherhood. We cannot make all people the same simply by stating so or by treating them alike."

Because change is the goal of any therapeutic process, counselors need to possess an awareness of the ways in which cultural, class, and language factors can serve as barriers to successful cross-cultural counseling. Sue (1981) notes the possibility that attitudinal similarity between client and counselor may be a more powerful determinant of counseling effectiveness than membership group similarity and asserts that counseling is more effective when employing communications and interaction patterns that are consistent with the cultural values of the client.

Counselors do not have to have the same belief systems and values as their clients. However, they do need to demonstrate an understanding of these systems and values and accept them in a non-judgmental way that reflects an awareness that they are legitimate approaches to interpreting the world.

Counseling Deaf Clients

The goal of counseling for Deaf clients is, of course, the same as that previously mentioned for counseling in general, i.e. to enable individuals to explore thoughts, feelings and behavior patterns in a safe and supportive environment. Some very special characteristics of Deaf clients and Deaf culture raise important considerations for the provision of effective counseling services. Before discussing these, we first want to establish a brief working definition of the term "Deaf" so that the discussion can be viewed in an appropriate context.

Defining the Deaf Client

For purposes of this paper, the Deaf client is not defined in audiological terms with specific criteria for hearing loss but rather is an individual with a conscious linguistic, cultural, and political identification with the Deaf community. A defining

characteristic of the Deaf community is the use of American Sign Language (ASL), a complete language system distinct from English. Although the Deaf community member may have spoken, written and even manual English skills, ASL is the preferred means of discourse among community members. Of equal importance is the fact that the Deaf community does not view deafness as a handicap or as a pathological condition but as a characteristic of its members. The effective counselor needs to accept the legitimacy of ASL and disassociate himself or herself from a "disease" model of deafness in order to be an effective partner in the growth process. Related to this is the need for knowledge of and sensitivity to Deaf culture.

Client Use of ASL

Selecting the language used in the counseling process represents a major decision. For individual counseling there may be some flexibility, depending on the needs and preferences of the client, among American Sign Language (ASL), a signed English system, or Pidgin Signed English (PSE). PSE may even be preferred with a hearing counselor. However in a group situation the preferred mode of communication will most frequently be ASL. A counselor who does not have competency in expressing and receiving information through ASL is at a distinct disadvantage. If the preferred language of the clients is not used, limitations are placed on naturalness, spontaneity of thought, and comfort level within communicative exchanges. If even one client is unable or unwilling to use a communication system other than ASL, then ASL must be used. Otherwise there will be a definite breakdown of communication within the group.

Although the counselor's hearing status may not be an issue for all Deaf clients, it should be understood that some Deaf clients will prefer a Deaf counselor and will feel more comfortable in a counseling setting in which all parties are Deaf. This preference, of course, must be honored.

The importance of ASL for most group counseling situations with Deaf clients cannot be over-emphasized. If a counselor, either Deaf or hearing, does not have comprehensive ASL skills, it is difficult to be an effective therapist. It is not impossible to be an effective counselor if competent interpreters are available, but it does create barriers that would not otherwise exist. Deaf people deserve direct and full access to the counselor and in all

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counseling situations. Unfortunately, there are not enough Deaf or hearing counselors proficient in ASL to provide deaf individuals sufficient access to mental health services. This is an issue that must be addressed by professionals and by members of the deaf community.

Interpreting Issues

The growth of interpreting as a profession has had a positive impact on the lives of Deaf individuals, and interpreters have provided services in medical, educational, legal and therapeutic settings. In counseling, there must be an awareness among the three parties—client(s), counselor, interpreter—of the ways in which communication breakdowns and potential misunderstandings can be avoided.

Any time communication interactions are interpreted, all parties involved in the exchange must be sensitive to the chance that nuances and shadings of meaning may not be conveyed in all their complexity. There may also be problems in matching the affect of clients or counselor's stress.

A certain distancing occurs even when a highly trained and certified interpreter is employed. This happens when two parties rely on a third for close personal and intimate communicative interactions. Even when all the interpreting protocols are observed, the development of rapport, trust and mutual respect is difficult and may require more time than a non-interpreted situation. Reliance on an interpreter can highlight differences between counselor and clients. This may be acceptable for those deaf clients willing to work through an interpreter. Others will have reservations about the presence of a third party in a counseling situation and may reject the presence of an interpreter, favoring a counselor proficient with ASL.

Deaf and Hearing Clients in
Group Counseling

In any situation the decision to join a group that is homogeneous or one that is mixed should be made by the Deaf client. It is inappropriate for a counselor to view any decision as more appropriate than another. The decision may vary depending on the client, the composition of the group, and the purpose of the counseling. Having said that, it should be borne in mind that communication will normally be clearer in a situation in which all members of the group are Deaf. The presence of hearing clients may place additional stress on com-

munication, with attendant demands on the interpreter, who would not only function as a facilitator of client/counselor communication but who also would be responsible for client/client interaction. Again, some Deaf clients may prefer not to function in mixed groups, even if the hearing clients are fluent in ASL.

There is one special situation where it may be beneficial or desirable to have mixed groups. This is the case of family therapy. Most deaf individuals grow up in families with hearing parents and siblings (Moores, 1987). Although Deaf people tend to marry other Deaf people, their offspring are predominantly hearing. Instances in which all family members are Deaf are rare. Still, the counselor cannot assume that Deaf clients would be comfortable with interpreters in such a setting or even that they would be amenable to mixed deaf/hearing family counseling sessions.

Summary

The goals and principles of group counseling are similar to those of individual counseling and the process is designed to enable clients to explore their feelings, thoughts and behaviors in a safe and supportive environment. The goals and principles remain constant regardless of the hearing status of the participants. The common element is an emphasis on change. Clients bring themselves to therapy because they have determined that something in their lives needs to be changed. In order to serve Deaf clients effectively, the counselor must have a number of skills and insights over and above the usual requirements. Foremost is an appreciation of the richness of Deaf culture and an acceptance of ASL as a legitimate language of choice of an identifiable group of Americans. Beyond the appreciation and acceptance, one must be knowledgeable about Deaf culture and related world views that are expressed by that culture, with a sensitivity to the fact that cultural differences do not suggest deficiencies, but rather viable alternatives for dealing with the world and ourselves.

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