

"Good counselling is just excellent communication skills! Or is it?"

Authors:

Ms Merrelyn Bates

Mr Paul Stevenson

ABSTRACT

There have been arguments about whether counselling is a new profession while other established professions engage in similar practices and have a legitimacy of their own. Theoretical frameworks for professional counselling are discussed with an emphasis on practice, values and professional ethics. The suggestion that effective counselling is simply effective communication is discussed and it is argued that a unifying basis can only be derived from the assumptions underlying the practice of counselling rather than the theory which informs it.

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Introduction

Within the last ten years there has been a growth in the number of people offering their services as counsellors. Many have a professional background in either psychiatry, psychology or social work, but many more, including school guidance counsellors, community nurses, ministers of religion, medical practitioners and others, are beginning to include counselling as part of their activities.

Only within the last few years have tertiary institutions developed specific undergraduate degrees in counselling outside the usual recognised professional frameworks. Currently a young occupational group of counsellors are developing processes for registration as a recognised profession and are finding that they must compete with other established groups. Although we can complain that elitism and exclusion are alive and well in the so-called helping professions, the tensions are actually healthy because issues of practice, professionalism and accountability are being addressed. It is out of this debate that a clear basis for professionalism can be established.

There is a perception that counselling is just the effective management of very good communication skills in a one to one situation and that anyone who communicates well can put up their shingle and commence a practice. The more established professions who have traditionally engaged in counselling have a history that lends weight to their perceived legitimacy: psychiatrists can argue from a medical model that they understand the physical and the mental interrelationships within a person; psychologists claim that their study of individuals has a scientific base and so their methods contribute to the mental, behavioural and emotional well-being of their clients; and social workers believe in social justice, empowerment, and the promotion of human dignity. So where does that leave the rest of the counsellors? They are just well intentioned people being very good communicators - aren't they?

Theoretical frameworks

When we look for theoretical frameworks we find that both communication and counselling are becoming identified as their own distinct disciplines. In fact, pick up any communication text to find what it is all about and you will discover that the first chapter or two is likely to be devoted to theories and models of communication. Many texts provide a historical perspective which takes the reader from the engineering models associated with the telecommunications industry of the 1940s, through the contribution of psychology which highlighted the importance of perception, emotion and non-verbal signals in the 60s and 70s, to the work of sociologists and social theorists who contributed further to the understanding of communication in the 80s because of their emphasis on language, culture and political meanings (shifting the focus from the sender of the message to the message itself). The 90s have had a focus on the importance of audience who bring their own expectations and prejudices and Mohan, McGregor, Saunders and Archee (1997) have indicated that information technology will be the focus of future communication theoretical developments in the 21st century.

Thus *Communication* or *Communications* has become an important area of study according to the demands of various disparate interest groups and specialist expertise in communication is becoming highly valued. Should we as counsellors identify ourselves as good communicators and claim "communication" as the centre of our work - or is there more to it than that? Both of the writers of this article agree that training in communication skills is an important and developing area with a lot to offer industry, education, the justice system and the community at large. Indeed, we have spent a number of years devising and running programs in communication at university level and we recognise the disturbing limitations that a bunch of theories which include both technological and interpersonal aspects of the subject, as if they are one and the same thing, being peddled as acceptable truth. We are becoming alarmed that these mechanistic theories tend to depersonalise the individual and to reify models which reduce the person to merely a collection of roles and the 'communicator' as a replaceable functionary in a system of 'interpersonal interaction'.

The theoretical frameworks for counselling have been recognised for a greater period and, despite internal debates, represents a much more unified body of knowledge (see for example McGowan & Schmidt, 1962). Discussions about 'interpersonal communication' have been primarily grounded within the psychiatric model and initially was particularly influenced by psychoanalytic theorists such as Freud, Jung and Adler. Although it is quite easy to find critics of Freud particularly amongst those who have been influenced by the behaviour therapy movement it is important to give him credit for the ideas which inform current practice. He invented what we now call counselling, and revolutionised the treatment for those suffering emotional and mental distress. Prior to the use of Freud's methods, quite controversial at the time, people were either "locked-up" or provided with a straight medical response. Those clients who were not physically ill or a danger to others but who were just managing their distress were referred to priests or ministers of religion for solace.

Since Freud's contribution there has been a proliferation of alternative models of counselling. To list and explain them all would be more than one article but there are certainly a number who come to mind quite quickly. Where would counselling be without the developments promoted by Carl Rogers and his person-centered focus, Albert Ellis and his focus on rational emotive behavioural counselling, and Aaron Beck for his cognitive focus? Other names which have contributed greatly to the developments in counselling techniques include Virginia Satir, William Glasser, Gerard Egan, Eric Berne, Robert Carkhuff, and Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. There are many others but all of these are counsellors who have communicated their professional expertise in a popular manner.

Having noted that there is a history to both communication and counselling it is important to recognise that theoretical frameworks, and the models that have been developed, arise from very different starting points. Counselling frameworks are fundamentally grounded in the need to alleviate personal and interpersonal distress; the focus is clear and whether the techniques are required to manage a crisis situation or to respond to a lack of self esteem the purpose of the professional intervention is agreed upon by all who are involved. On the other hand, communication theories and models have not been developed as a response to a single catalyst. In a pot pourri of discourse we can see there is a focus on people but the whole knowledge base surrounding the study of communication is quite amorphous and it is clear that the theoretical frameworks for communication and counselling are different, each being a reflection of their own systemic origins.

Practice and responsibilities

Because counselling has one over-riding purpose - to alleviate personal and interpersonal distress - the counsellor requires a knowledge base which includes awareness of self, awareness of values, a range of communication strategies, and an understanding of contextual influences which will determine the direction taken and the therapeutic plan which is developed. In particular the counsellor needs to be able to understand and then harness the counsellor-client *relationship* so that the client is able to learn and then risk experimenting with new communicative strategies in his or her own life space. The counsellor must become a *teacher* of communication skills (Carkhuff & Berenson, 1976) and since the starting point for the client's learning must always be his own self-understanding, the initial focus will almost always be on the real and current interpersonal relationships and the communication difficulties inherent in them.

Bearing this in mind it is clear that people who are excellent and effective communicators will not necessarily be effective counsellors. True, they will have an understanding of the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and have a strong intuitive understanding of the behavioural elements which contribute to effective communication but without training they will not be communicating within a framework which is solely focused on the clients, their vulnerability, and the appropriate outcome plans.

Concepts, contexts and skills

A client presents in a context in which there are a lot of variables and his dysfunctions will be directly related to one or more of them. The question is, which elements of the client's context are relevant to the problem and what are the most pertinent concepts and skills that he needs to be taught in order to cope more effectively? The counsellor needs a conceptual map of the client's personal life space if she is to equip him with the *appropriate* skills. She must pay particular attention to the client's existing interpersonal skills, assess his strengths, and then help him restate the problem making the concepts cognitively meaningful and relevant in the process. Only then can the client act to improve his own communication skills. Action always follows real understanding and understanding without action is not really understanding at all.

Concepts

The counsellor must decide early in the proceedings what level of cognitive complexity is appropriate for the client so she can help him look at his problem differently and develop new ways of coping. But she is unable to do anything without an appropriate set of concepts and an adequate language with which she can express what the client cannot. It is these concepts that allow counsellors to deal with the complexity of client responses and often they will need to have several different theoretical frameworks in order to meet the range of problems presented. One client in a crisis may require a highly directive behavioural approach early on in the crisis whereas another whose problems are of a more existential nature will benefit more from a highly Rogerian "hands off" approach.

Effective counsellors must not be uncomfortable with the problems people have, and they need to develop an intuitive ability to respond appropriately and at the right level of concreteness and simplicity in the counselling session. They need to come to the encounter with an in-depth understanding of concepts like empathy, unconditional regard, immediacy, respect and confrontation. Above all they need to have an understanding of the different levels of genuineness. They need to know that although it is essential to mean what you say in a therapeutic relationship (a client can see through pretence in a flash), sometimes the full disclosure of all the counsellor's feelings in the encounter will not be appropriate. Only when the therapeutic relationship is well developed is it likely that counsellor and client will explore their own feeling responses to each other in-depth and with very high levels of genuineness.

Lastly the counsellor needs a set of theoretical concepts about personality. Freud's notion of the unconscious and Jung's expansion of that into a deep understanding of the meanings of myth, symbol and ritual in everyday life must be coupled with an understanding of the various forms of psychopathology, and of the medical and social components presented by clients. They also need to understand the concepts behind different procedural schools of thought including behaviour therapy and the reframing associated with rational emotive therapy; the effective counsellor needs to be able to use any of these concepts when the situation demands it. The client's confusion must be interpreted into a language which he can comprehend and the counsellor must be able to select an appropriate model so that he can understand his problems as they are explored and reframed.

Contexts

It is not only the concepts that counsellors need - they must also be aware of the wide ranging contexts from which their clients come. These contexts are so varied that each one carries with it a systemic view of the world or a way of describing the world in its own jargon. A person may be in the middle of a crisis involving their own previous child abuse while another is in crisis over the stress resulting from a potential bankruptcy. Each client will be expressing their distress or discomfort in a jargon that relates to what they perceive to be the context of their problems and the counsellor needs to be able to respond. Quite reasonably this need to understand the dynamics of a number of complex social contexts has led to the appropriate specialisation which currently exists in various fields of counselling. There is a tendency for some counsellors to define themselves and their expertise in terms of a particular psychological or psychotherapeutic school of thought. It would be a pity to see the counselling movement in Australia fragment into various theoretical or conceptual specialisations, and there is no need for counsellors to become identified as a cognitive behaviourist, rational emotive therapist or psychoanalyst, etc. when in truth the concepts overlap and often divert attention from the central issue which is contextual. A person may come to see a counsellor because their child has a drug problem and they want to know what to *do*: they have not come for psychoanalysis, they have come to counselling for an understanding and assistance with a drug problem within the context of juvenile addiction. Our purpose is not to dig up to the past, it is to deal with the present.

Counsellors not only require an effective foundation in communication, they also need know about the dynamics of addiction, sexual abuse, domestic violence, issues of power, stress, lifestyle changes, depression, loss and grief, etc. Certainly some counsellors work in specific areas better than others do, but without a content knowledge of the forces operating they can not contribute constructively to the improved well-being of another; they may be able to be empathic and supportive but when it comes to point a client towards appropriate action they may be at a complete loss.

Counsellors must be able to travel with another's emotions as well as understand them. They must have a clear view of cause and effect *in context* in order to relate effectively. Certainly experienced communicators may be able to respond intuitively but they do not necessarily have the knowledge of the context or concepts that will help them help others to move forward with an appropriate action plan. So, as far as *concepts* are concerned we are advocating that counsellors have an eclectic approach that will use what are essentially metaphors for behaviour appropriate to a particular person with a particular problem.

Does this lead to inconsistency and confusion? In Merrelyn's counselling practice Eric Berne's psychoanalytic material (Jongeward, & James, 1977; Berne, 1961) is frequently utilised to explain to individuals and couples the dynamics of language and its impact on their self-perceptions and interactions with their partners, family members and others. Material developed by Robert Carkhuff (1969) is presented to help individuals and couples focus on qualities that will enhance their interactions. This same material is provided to students studying communication skills at the university. This highlights an important point - while we are eclectic in regard to concepts we are not eclectic when it comes to the counsellor's *skills*.

Skills

These skills are non-negotiable and not open to compromise: all are necessary and when understood and internalised form the value base for our profession. Although counselling is described by different writers in different ways there is agreement on what follows.

1. Effective counselling requires an understanding of self and a detailed awareness of the impact of oneself on others.
2. A counsellor needs to be equipped with advanced listening skills. They must be able to recognise the various levels of empathy of their responses, (i.e. reflecting an accurate understanding of the feeling being expressed by the client). It is necessary to develop the ability to listen with an open mind, to refrain from judgemental responses and to actively check with the client that the understanding of the feelings being expressed is correct.
3. Counselling demands a process of negotiation and problem solving. A clear goal needs to be set so that the client is able to take appropriate action in their own life space and also to take responsibility for the consequences of their action.
4. Self disclosure is a powerful tool that can be used by an effective communicator but when it is used within the constraints of the therapeutic encounter it needs to be done with considerable care.

5. An understanding of the complexity of communication is a basic foundation within the development of an effective counselling framework. An ability to read, interpret and respond non-verbally is critical. The use of conscious use of paralinguistic signals, postures and gestures to pace a distressed client for a sense of greater emotional self-control are just some examples of skills required.
6. Counselling will generally use a conversational style - as Eric Berne pointed out there is plenty left if you remove the solemn face and the big words; counsellors need not be afraid of ordinariness.
7. The effective counsellor requires the skills of assertiveness and the ability to confront a client when it is therapeutically appropriate.
8. Counsellors must be competent in their communication to be credible and must be able to self-monitor - they must have the ability to concentrate their messages so that they are immediate (i.e. they relate to the here and now) and refer to concrete interpersonal issues.
9. Finally, counsellors must recognise the impact of their own personal values, attitudes and self-esteem. The effective counsellor must develop and use the ability to model his or her behaviour for the client; this is one of the most potent media for personal growth and change. This brings us to the all important question of values.

The question of values

Each of us comes to the counselling encounter with a complex and hard-won set of values. Both client and counsellor will hold certain principles to do with interpersonal conduct. Not only that but counsellor and client may actually have different value systems. It is important to note that anyone's value system is likely to contain inherent contradictions; contradictions which if exposed can result in high levels of anxiety and the need to grow. Inevitably the counselling encounter will be dealing with the client's inability to decide between possible causes of action and this will mean that they will need to explore, and if necessary, modify their own value system. This in turn means that if the counsellor is to be at all helpful she must be able to enter the world of the client's value system so that she is able to understand potential sources of conflict. It is imperative that the counsellor is able to do this non-judgementally: she needs to be able to entertain her own "disbeliefs" (i.e. values held by the client but not her) [Rokeach, 1960] and, to the extent that she is able, to either model or suggest alternatives which will be effective as well as minimally disruptive. If the counsellor has a sense of missionary zeal, or a desire to impose a set of beliefs other than those inherent in the skills listed above, she is likely to, at best, be ineffective and at worst highly destructive to the well-being of her client.

In relation to the notion that counselling is simply effective communication it should be noted that highly skilled communicators are often in the business of persuasion. Adolf Hitler was and so are sales people, politicians, media representatives. Effective counselling implies the inherent values of tolerance, acceptance and respect for the individual that often do not inform effective communication. What we can say is that effective communicators are able to use many of the basic skills of counselling in order to "get their message across", but this has nothing to do with the value or otherwise of the message itself.

Both communication and counselling call upon knowledge, including an understanding of action based techniques, to promote constructive interpersonal dynamics. But this knowledge can be also used quite destructively. For clients, who are usually at their most vulnerable when attending counselling, it is imperative that counsellors use their skills in a way that protects the fragile client from further “abuse” through misuse of authority and status. Effective counsellors hold ethical values that effective communicators often don’t have.

Conclusion

So, in answer to our earlier question an effective counsellor does require more than effective communication skills. Counselling is definitely a discipline of its own. It is our belief that one can not be an effective counsellor without being an effective communicator. Effective counsellors have a strong knowledge base, an awareness of their own human vulnerability, a desire to continue searching and an awareness that they are often dealing with vulnerable and easily influenced people. Counsellors can be responsible for their clients’ emotional life and death; a very heavy burden to shoulder and one which is taken up consciously and willingly. If this is not the case then it is possible our eager counsellor may be just an effective communicator.

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