

FEATURES OF STUDENT PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELLING

Maria Dorina PASCA

PhD, psychologist, The University of Medicine and Pharmacy,
Targu Mures, Romania

Student psychological counseling is one of the means to acknowledge student identity by employing counseling tools that allow the psychologist to make use of a set of skills essential in achieving envisaged outcomes. To act as counseling psychologist for students is to guide actions by the five wh- questions: who (the client is), why (the counselor is approached), who (the counselor talks to), what (problem the student has to tackle), how (the problem can be solved). Some of the most important features that contribute to solving student problems are the counselor's deontology, trustworthiness and attitude that are to be relied on without impeding the client's personality traits. Thus, developing awareness of the features underlying student psychological counseling and acting accordingly is the real test for any professional in the field. Therefore, the real challenge is not being in the lion's den, but living with it.

Key words: *counselor, student, psychologist, acceptance, identity.*

1. THE COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGIST'S PROFILE

Counseling is a dynamic and continuous dialogue between a counselor and a client, either on an individual or group base, which unfolds by stages depending on the evolution of the counseled person(s). According to Reber S.A. [1] counseling, as defined by specialized dictionaries, consists of services like providing information, orienting, giving advice to a client (i.e. an individual or a group) on problem solving and future planning. As a result, an important element in student psychological counseling is to understand the role and scope of the counseling psychologist.

The dictum "Primo non nocere" (i.e. first, do no harm) is the landmark of the professional providing psychological counseling to students. Next, two of the major principles guiding the counseling activity are: a. all people are special and valuable given their uniqueness; b. each individual is accountable for his own decisions. In addition to these, the skills and attitudes of the counseling psychologists mold their activities

According to C. Rogers [2], one of the founders of psychotherapy, there are six prerequisites that must be met by the counseling psychologists at the beginning of their work with the counseled person:

- There must be a two-way communication between the counselor and the client;

- The counseled person must be the one seeking for assistance;
- The counselor-client relationship must be based on sincere and genuine communication;
- The counselor must show a positive unconditioned attitude towards the subject under discussion;
- The counselor must be empathic with the client's frame of reference;
- The counselor must offer the client unconditioned acceptance, which is the basis for the latter's inner psychological security.

In terms of the values and educational assets espoused by the counseling psychologists, these have to enable them to assist the clients in analyzing their problems and identifying solutions to address these, in teaching them how to approach the problem solving process by focusing their attention on understanding the underlying causes of their troubles. Consequently, the goals of the counseling psychologist are:

1. to establish an mutual agreement on the goals concerning the problems to be solved;
2. to be aware of goal hierarchy.
3. to establish strategies.

In order to accomplish all of the above, the counselor should adopt a positive unconditioned attitude to the client. In this respect, sincere heartfelt communication contributes to overcoming inner restraints and blocks. Moreover, it is recommended for such a specialist to show complete unrestrained acceptance, to listen patiently, to help the client surmount the silent moments by making him understand that he is free to approach subjects of their own choice, to say anything about himself without being constrained to talk about topics that he has to wish to tackle.

However, before reaching this stage, the counseling psychologist must prove, through the quality of his work, that he has the following competences [3]:

- a. **attitudes (how to do)**
- b. **abilities/skills (what to do)**
- c. **knowledge (what to know)**

As far as the counselor's **attitudes** are concerned, they can be identified when the professional under discussion:

1. shows respect for the client by valuing the latter's uniqueness;
2. assists the client all along the counseling process and the evolution of the symptoms;
3. accepts unconditionally the person by acknowledging his dignity and makes no criticism regardless of what the client says or does;
4. shows empathy (i.e. the capacity to enter the student's feelings), gains insight into the other's universe as the s/he perceives it and shows no judgment;
5. displays agreement between behavior, feelings and speech and shows full awareness of one's own attitudes and capacity to acknowledge his real feelings;
6. collaborates with the student by involving the latter in the problem solving process;
7. resorts to positive thinking which builds upon his confidence in himself and in his students;
8. proves accountability by getting involved at cognitive level in the student's problems.

The **abilities/skills** of the counselor can be recognized when the latter:

1. listens actively by:
 - a. not allowing silence to dominate and taking the floor to assist the counseled person;
 - b. taking the floor in order to maintain contact with the student and not miss the changes;

c. assuming a “brother” like role rather than a “father” like one;

d. communicating with the interlocutor in an fair trusting unsuspecting manner;

e. listening and talking without conceiving projects about the interlocutor and without stalling the dialogue;

f. listening and participating into the discussion in an unhurried patient manner by focusing on the other’s ‘inner fight and feelings’;

2. observes in order to better understand the message conveyed and emotional state of the client by paying attention to:

a. the verbal communication

b. the non-verbal communication

3. formulates and asks open, closed, hypothetical, justifying questions;

4. reformulates (in a ‘mirror’like fashion) and paraphrases in a neutral, dubitative or interrogative manner without repeating the client’s exact words/phrases in order to better understand the student’s message.

5. supplies information interactively so that the student can make responsible decisions;

6. sums up as a way of reviewing and closing the discussion in order to outline the topics already discussed and clarified and to identify subjects that require future attention;

7. shows understanding by

a. echoing the interlocutor’s speech through adverbs, interjections (e.g. That’s right, I see..., I find interesting what..., etc.);

b. mirroring the interlocutor’s speech, gestures, body language, mimic, pitch upon observing the whole sensory range in order to better understand the student’s emotions and thus convey him the feeling that he is understood and accepted;

c. reverberates by repeating phrases/sentences already uttered by the interlocutor, highlights the contrasting aspects without rejecting them, reminds delicately what has already been said or completes in order to express what the client said;

8. unveils, within professional/normal limits, his own feelings experienced while working with the student in order to create a warm atmosphere contributing to the goals of the counseling process.

The **knowledge** gathered in time by the counselor helps him:

1. Correctly identify the knowledge level of the student;

2. identify the information the student needs avoiding information overload that could hinder the problem solving process;

3. use his skills of conveying the information in an interactive manner by meeting the following requirements:

a. uses language adequate to the student’s level of understanding;

b. present accurate information;

c. presents the information sequentially in accordance with the events unfolding;

d. supports the student’s efforts to search and identify the information needed;

e. analyses the student’s information and co-evaluates it in order to remove the inaccuracies;

f. avoids delivering insufficient information so he does not interfere with the correctness of the decision made.

Another term employed by specialized literature is that of **counseling therapist**. Related to this concept, Janis and Mann (apud Holdevici) [4] identify a set of decision making styles. One of these is called the **non-conflict adherence** and characterizes someone who identifies a solution to a problem

and applies it regardless of the disastrous results. With counseling situations, a person displaying such a style is one who strongly believes in a psychological theory and applies it regardless of the circumstances.

Another decision-making style is based on **non-conflict change** and characterizes the counselor who undergoes opinion changes swiftly without pondering too much and adopts an eclectic attitude with no good reasons for that.

The **defensive-avoidant** style is characteristic of people who ignore problems or simply refuse to analyze them. The counselors displaying such a style cannot convince their clients to analyze their own problems at a deep level. Moreover, their behavior is suspiciously nice.

The style termed **hypervigilance** is representative of a person aware of the plethora of possibilities to be used in the decision making process and yet anxious and concerned about not missing important aspects. Such counselors live under a high level of stress.

The style that is most efficient in counseling is the **vigilance-focused** one. A person characterized as such is motivated and involved in the decision making process, displaying an alert and open attitude during the counseling sessions. Moreover, such a person's cognitive efficiency is not affected by possible information overload.

Holdevici (apud Ivey and Simek-Downing) [5] presents the characteristics of the efficient and inefficient counselor comparatively, as shown in the table below.

Table no. 1 Characteristics of efficient and inefficient counselors by comparison.

Seq.	Responsibilities	Efficient counseling therapist	Inefficient counseling therapist
1.	Definition of problem behavior	a. elaborates alternative definitions b. selects a working definition	a. accepts the definition offered by the student b. is unable to define the problem on his own
2.	Focus on the counseling and therapy process	Chooses a certain definition for the problem and starts working on it with the student	Is unable to choose a definition of the problem and moves from a topic to another with no clear direction
3.	Creative activity	a. is flexible in the answers provided to the student b. relies on various theories to elaborate new courses of action c. relies on creative techniques to work with the student	a. has a standard way of answering the student b. applies the same set of techniques regardless of the students' problems.
4.	Decision-making process	a. directs the student towards adopting creative solutions b. focuses therapy efforts on a model anchored in decision-making theory.	a. elaborates only one alternative to a problem. b. Questions the student without a clear-cut strategy aimed at making a decision.
5.	Conjectural factors	Defines de problem taking into account both personal and conjectural factors.	a. assesses the problem as an individual one. b. Ignores the socio-economic, psychological and social factors.

Seq.	Responsibilities	Efficient counseling therapist	Inefficient counseling therapist
6.	Likely changes	a. works on the subject b. works to change some environmental circumstances, as well.	Works solely on the subject.
7.	Work methodology	a. Changes the theoretical approach depending on the circumstances. b. Chooses an adequate set of work techniques. c. Generates new perspectives on the problem. d. Initiates open discussions.	a. relies on only one theoretical approach. b. Uses a standard set of techniques. c. Takes into account only what the student says about the problem. d. Initiates rigid discussions.
8.	Problem solving	a. elaborates multiple solutions from which the student can choose. b. Elaborates a concrete action plan. c. Elaborates the problem before giving the solution.	a. elaborates no or only one solution. b. Allows the student to manage the implementation of the solution on his own. c. Rushes into identifying immediate solutions without properly analyzing the problem.
9.	Decision-making style	Vigilance based	Non-conflict adherence, based on non-conflict change, defensive and based on hyper vigilance.

In conclusion, only upon meeting the prerequisites of efficiency listed above can the counseling psychologist “start” his endeavors. Moreover, five Wh- questions should be part of the guiding principles to rely on:

- who** asks for him;
- why** people contact him;
- who** he talks to (himself or the student);
- what** the problem is;
- how** the problem can be solved.

2. INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP COUNSELING REQUIREMENTS

To achieve its goal, psychological counseling needs to meet the client’s requests and allow the counselor positively influence the way the relationship between him and the client will unfold. Therefore, knowledge and application of

the counseling psychologist’s deontological code [6] allows for the application of strategies that enable the specialists in the field to live up to the high standards of this profession. The guiding principles of this code are as follows:

1. to maintain the confidentiality of the information obtained from the client;
2. to be aware of one’s own limits;
3. to avoid excessive requests for irrelevant information;
4. to treat the client the same way the counselor would like to be treated, that is with respect, kindness, honesty and acceptance.

Counseling is nothing but an intensive process [6] to assist normal people who are willing to achieve their objectives and to work efficiently, whereas **psychotherapy** is a more complex psychological

treatment focused on diminishing problem symptoms or behaviors or, in other words, on re-balancing and re-constructing personality.

When approaching the client, a counseling psychologist must clearly define the former's problem, elaborate possible alternative solutions, choose an alternative and implement it.

According to Baban A. [7], the stages of the counseling process are:

a. defining the problem, namely establishing what the problem is and formulating it;

b. describing the problem from a behavioral, cognitive and emotional point of view;

c. identifying the likely factors contributing to problem emergence and development;

d. identifying the factors that maintain and activate the problem, in other words, that prevent the development of adequate attitudes and efficient skills;

e. developing the intervention plan by stages: goal, objectives and intervention strategies;

f. evaluating the intervention by assessing the changes occurred at knowledge, attitudes and skills level.

Building upon the decision making theory, Bramer [8] advances the following stages for therapeutic counseling:

1. establishing a close relationship with the client and involving the latter in the process of solving his personal problems. Moreover, the counselor must make sure that those asking for assistance are really concerned about the process and determined enough to make decisions likely to seriously influence their life.

2. identifying and clarifying the problem, as well as establishing the goals of the psychotherapeutic endeavor;

3. establishing and analyzing the alternative conducive to problem solving;

4. collecting relevant information;

5. analyzing the implications deriving from the information collected and the consequences of possible alternatives;

6. clarifying the value system underlying personal options – the clients must know exactly what they want, as well as the prioritization of their responsibilities. At this stage, the counselor must support the client in exploring his interests, abilities, competences, family related circumstances, social expectations and environmental elements.

7. reexamining the goals, the alternative solutions, the risks and their consequences;

8. choosing one alternative and formulating an action plan to reach the already established goal;

9. drawing with the therapist's assistance conclusions applicable to general life situations;

10. testing the plan by conducting regular evaluations that include new information and changes in the external circumstances.

In conclusion, the first rule of any interview focused on psychological counseling is to **pinpoint the problem** together with the client, establishing both counselor's and client's responsibilities during the process.

Once the above guiding principle is employed, there are a number of requirements that must also be met. One of the most important one is to view the process as a constructive and efficient one both at individual and group level.

Another major factor that should not be neglected is that, according to Ionescu G. [9], teenage **psychotherapy** groups offer the

framework for testing perceptions of the self and of the relationships with adults. Moreover, the group plays an important role in increasing a teenager's self-esteem, ego, personal harmony and feeling of confidence in dealing with the environment. All of the above are expectations that need to be met whenever a teenager displays behavioral problems and identity crises. Consequently, when a teenager shows personality inconsistencies, psychotherapy within a group is the method to rely on. The group should consist of approximately ten members. Generally, six of these form the core and participate constantly to the process showing interpersonal cohesion. Due to the selection process and to other unpredictable connected to the evolution of the problem, the other group members may participate sporadically and show low group adherence. Therefore, the group should not include teenagers who are sociopaths, psychotic, acknowledged as gay or suffer from drug-addiction since all of the above are the focus of therapeutic groups and/or approaches.

Both during individual and group counseling, the psychologist must remember the following:

- **a dyad** must be used in individual counseling;
- **the group** must be composed of 6-10 members, 8 members being the average group number;
- **age**: close to the group age (18-20-24);
- **gender**: the group can be either a mixed one or gender based depending on the topic of the meeting and the attitudes of the group members;
- **socio-cultural and intellectual level** favors the individual's self awareness degree and group activation;

- **room location and atmosphere**: the circle positioning of the group favors group activities, the lightening should not be annoying, the chairs should be comfortable and at an arm's length from one another;

- **activity atmosphere**: should be nice, pleasant in order to ensure trust and safety feelings for the client and thus prove the counselor's empathy, responsibility and focus on positive thinking;

- **(counseling) meetings** must be run based on internal rules of the group that are commonly agreed and respected or, in certain cases, based on the personal contract between the counselor and the client;

- **meetings pace**: generally weekly, respecting the same day, place, time;

- **meetings length**: between 60-120 minutes, 90 minutes on average (especially for group meetings);

- **number of meetings**: minimum two, maximum 50 depending on the problems to be covered.

Another important feature of the counseling process is the **quality of the therapist** and for this a number of guiding principles need to be followed:

- the therapy should not start without a thorough and complex analysis of the problem;
- the process needs to start as a common effort on both sides: the therapist and the client;
- the first meeting should not touch upon intimate issues;
- the counselor should not lecture on moral matters;
- predictions should not be made from the beginning;
- The therapist should refrain from saying 'there are several cases in which the same problem occurs';

- Any aspect of the therapy should be discussed with the client;
 - The therapist should model himself on the problem and the client.
- All of the above highlight once more that the psychological counseling process is bidirectional: the therapist focuses on the problem of the client, while the interlocutor/student manages at a certain point to reach a certain state of “symbiosis”, which is the positive outcome of the atmosphere created.

3. INSTRUMENTS EMPLOYED IN PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELING

Taking into account the features of psychological counseling as presented by this theoretical investigation aiming the academic environment and not only, the **instruments** to be used in student counseling are the ones presented by either Carl Rogers in his **person-focused** theory or by Albert Ellis in his **behavioral rational-emotional** theory.

As far as Rogers’ theory is concerned, this focuses on the main innermotivational forces contributing to a person’s development. The theoretical model is part of the experiential humanist approaches and its features are as follows:

- the counseled subject is allowed to have more autonomy and independence as a result of the premise that the latter is able to understand him/herself.

- the counseling process is client focused with the counselor acting as a facilitator of the counseling relationship and hence triggering constructive transformations in the client’s personality.

- unlike dynamic models (i.e. psychoanalysis) and behavioral ones, client-centered counseling focuses on the role played by the emotional factors and on the person’s self-perception. In this respect, the counselor must be fully aware of the client’s perspective on his/her own situation.

- the person-focused counseling emphasizes the present and not the past experiences (I.e. case history) of the subject.

- the client-counselor relationship is the most important trigger for the counseling process. As far as the latter is concerned, the counselor’s attitude is essential in establishing a positive climate and thus, in allowing the client to evolve.

Worth reminding is that Rogers introduced the term of “**completely functional person**”, which is defined by the following dimensions:

- openness to experience and ability to realistically perceive the world;

- rational, non-defensive accomplishment oriented approach;

- involvement in life’s experiences;

- trust in oneself and one’s own personal values;

- capability to understand and adequately interpret life experiences;

- ability to accept the others as unique personalities;

- ability to exert personal dignity and self-respect;

- appreciation of others;

- ability to openly tell about personal experiences.

Last but not the least, Carl Rogers also introduces the change paradigm in approaching personality and believes that an additional aim of counseling is to prepare the subject for change, for coping with future transformations. In this respect, the term introduced

is that of the “**tomorrow person**” defined by: openness to the world; focus on authenticity; will to self-fulfill; aspiration to privacy; care for others; aspiration to spiritual values.

As a conclusion to the theoretical approach proposed by Rogers it is worth noting that the aim of counseling is to provide the premises for the development of those resources that ensure a person’s adaptive effectiveness and the harmonization of the relation between the person’s self-concept and life experiences.

Albert Ellis elaborates a theory on the rationality of the human behavior and analyzes the main categories of irrational ideas or beliefs that can generate a certain self destructive potential and need to be identified, investigated, overcome or removed through counseling. These can deeply impact people’s life generating dysfunctional behaviors or increased unhappiness and are viewed by the theoretician to be the theoretical underpinning of the practical counseling methodology.

According to A. Ellis, any human being is focused on three main goals: survival, suffering avoidance, ensuring a reasonable satisfaction level. To these, several other aims related to the human tendency to achieve a state of comfort can be added: being comfortable with oneself; feeling comfortable in private relations; achieving a state of comfort within the social community, at work, in learning and leisure time situations.

Ellis’ theory also known as the “ABC theory on personality” builds upon three elements: **A**ctivators/life events triggers; **B**eliefs (rational or irrational) and emotional and behavioral **C**onsequences determined by the way a person perceives and interprets life situations (vital activating events) based on

his/her beliefs. According to the theoretician, a person’s state of comfort is rather influenced by the latter’s ideas or beliefs than by life events as such. Consequently, the counseling process needs to focus on teaching the subject to develop rational beliefs, adequate emotions, a rational model for an efficient behavior and adequate life philosophy.

The stages Albert Ellis proposes for the counseling processes are:

- clarifying the irrational aspects of the subject’s behavior with the latter and demonstrating the relationship between the client’s irrational beliefs and the problems encountered;

- identifying the subject’s irrational beliefs and demonstrating to the latter the way these beliefs maintain or increase the problems;

- the client should take action with the counselor, abandon some of the irrational ideas and build a rational thinking and behavior model.

- expanding the debate beyond the boundaries of the ideas upheld by the client in order to prepare the latter for a healthy life philosophy.

Both Carl Rogers and Albert Ellis contributed to the development of a structurally new approach to psychological counseling. Moreover, they found new practical means to solve the problems that may occur during the relationship developed between the counselor and the client (student). Thus, all the information presented by this article is of utmost importance in delineating the guiding lines for the counseling psychologist and for the relationship this needs to establish with the client.

Even though the content of the current paper focused solely on the theoretical underpinnings of

the counseling process, this is to be continued in the next issue of the *Journal of Defense Resources Management* with a repertoire of techniques that support the counseling relationship. In this respect, the counseling psychologists are to find a minimal useful guide to various ways to manage the counselor-client relation.

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