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Cognitive Activities in Every-Day Decision-Making

There is no doubt that decision is a crucial concept in the practice of counselling. Decision-making plays a central role in all counselling situations but especially so in vocational, career, and employment counselling. Shall I prepare for this career, or that one? Shall I apply for this job; or keep this job; or quit this job? Will this particular vocational training benefit me? And so on, endlessly.

Much of the work on decision-making as it might apply to counselling has been constructed from formal, abstract models of decision-making and relies rather heavily on environmental considerations and upon "rational ideals". Efforts are made to treat personal factors such as personal frames of reference, emotions, fantasy, regret and other human elements as probable error-producing elements in "rational" decision-making. Such elements are to be eliminated since they probably lead to error (so long as a rational-ideal model of decision making is being used to explain and guide the counselling interview).

Suppose that instead of getting our perspective on decision-making from abstract, formal sources, we look instead to those activities of individual consciousness which seem to come into play as the individual is deciding and try to build our perspective on decision-making from knowledge of what actually goes on in the consciousness of individuals who are themselves in the process of deciding.

I have put together such a list consisting of twelve cognitive activities which many (but not all) individuals engage in while deciding. I have drawn this list from four sources: Schutz, Alfred. "The Problem of Rationality in the Social World", Economica, Vol. 10, May 1943; Garfinkel, Harold. Studies in Ethnomethodology. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967; my own counselling research notes from work with clients; and my own experience as a conscious being.

As counsellors, we are taught to "listen carefully" to what clients say. This ability enables us to do two things: first, listening carefully enables us to "catch" the real messages of the client; second, listening carefully enables us to reply empathically and thus to demonstrate to clients that we do, in fact, understand the meanings which they wish to convey. Certainly, the ability to receive meaning accurately as well as the ability to show that we have done so are essential to the conduct of the counselling interview. However, I believe that we must go beyond these two listening tasks and use listening to identify the cognitive activities which clients are engaging in as they attempt to make decisions, and solve problems. In other words, I am advocating that counsellors use their listening ability to hear in what clients say signs of the mental or cognitive activities which clients are using in their consciousness to problem-

solve, decide, plan and set courses of action. For example, when a client says, "I am so confused", we can interpret this utterance as a sign of a cognitive activity which can be labelled recognizing the cognitive state of uncertainty. However, when a client says "What I am confused about is my job future", then we can infer the cognitive activity of establishing a focal point.

In the following tabulation, I have listed a number of counselling utterances. Following each utterance I have listed the cognitive activity of which the client's utterance is a sign. By "hearing" the expressions of a client in this fashion, it is possible to build up from client expressions a "common-sense" framework of how decision-making actually is occurring (or failing to occur) in client consciousness. I suggest that such a "common-sense" perspective as decision-making may prove more useful to counsellors and clients than counsellor attempts to impose a "model" of decision-making on clients.

1. Client Utterance: "I'm confused, what's going on here?"
Cognitive Activity: Searching for situational definition. When an individual recognizes that he or she is uncertain, then cognitively a search is undertaken to define the parameters of the existential situation.

2. Client Utterance: "I'm not sure where the best place is to start."
- Cognitive Activity: Seeking for clarity. No existential situation is ever perfectly clear, nor is one's experience of any event unambiguous. Human experience is protean, i.e., extremely variable and capable of change and flux. However, an individual seeks a clarity of immediate experience which is sufficient for the purpose at hand.
3. Client Utterance: "Whose problem is this anyway, is it up to me to decide?"
- Cognitive Activity: Determining identity (of responsible agent). This cognitive search is to establish who is responsible: Me? You? They? It? No one?
4. Client Utterance: "Well, you know this reminds me of what happened to me two years ago when I moved from Kingston to Hull."
- Cognitive Activity: The individual is searching remembered experiences trying to locate similar past situations with which to compare and classify the present one now faced.

5. Client Utterance: "Last summer I had to make a similar choice one thing I did was..."

Cognitive Activity: Here the person is searching for means. By reviewing one's own memories one may locate certain "rules" for action which have worked to resolve similar difficulties or uncertainties in the past.

6. Client Utterance: "Let's see, I could go to file my claim today--on the other hand I can let it slide for a few days. I don't know--I can just see myself going into the office today and I'm not sure I'm ready to do that."

Cognitive Activity: This utterance indicates that the client is engaging in what can be called imaginative run-throughs. Cognitively, the person is "trying out", in imagination, certain courses of action. This is probably a universal feature of common-sense decision-making.

7. Client Utterance: "How will this fit into my schedule? Should I act now, later, or not at all in view of my time agenda?"

Cognitive Activity: The person evaluates an action or decision by trying to schedule it provisionally with reference to other life activities while considering reciprocal impacts. Now? Later? In one week? Twenty minutes? Or, "any time, one time is as good as another." This cognitive activity is known as temporalizing.

8. Client Utterance: "The car I want to buy is available today but I can't go to the dealer until next week. It may be sold - then what should I do?"

Cognitive Activity: This individual is forecasting changing circumstance. As an individual plans to act or decide, a common cognitive activity is an attempt to guess how circumstances may change and then build up a set of "in case of" options which can be put into play if some real aspect of the situation does change.

9. Client Utterance: "How much chance does this plan have of working?"

Cognitive Activity: This utterance is a sign that the client is testing for predictability, trying to

assess "How certain is this anyway?" To reduce surprise, the person may try to gather empirical evidence, gain greater clarity, verify the logic of plans, gain commitment from significant others, or may eliminate all possibility of surprise by abandoning a course of action altogether.

10. Client Utterance: "I have so many feelings about this... on the one hand I feel..., on the other..."

Cognitive Activity: This client is accounting for emotional feelings in decisions. For some persons, emotional feelings are an important factor in deciding-occasionally the most important. "I feel so depressed about that kind of job that I'll starve first." Other persons may experience significant feelings following a decision or course of action: "I'm so excited!", "I really regret my decision." In the first case feelings are a determinant of decisions; in the second they serve to evaluate, justify, confirm, defend, or, at times, revoke a decision.

11. Client Utterance: "I believe I should only decide on this after I discuss the implications with my family-- of course, my boss says that I should keep personal matters out of consideration. According to him is that I make the most efficient and practical decision possible.

Cognitive Activity: This utterance indicates that the client is balancing tribal rules for deciding against Cartesian rules. "It doesn't matter what I feel about this decision, nor is this any concern to my wife and children. What matters is that I make the most efficient and effective decision. I must optimize my benefits and remain objective about this." The person who talks this way is articulating Cartesian rules for deciding. This is what any rational efficient individual would decide in this case. Personal considerations and affiliations are down-played.

Tribal rules on the other hand, refer to the person who takes interpersonal solidarities into account. "I'll have to see what my

family thinks." "If there are lay-offs I won't bump Jane even though I have seniority. I just won't do that to a friend."

The person decides in accordance with whom it is inferentially important that he or she maintain personal respect, agreement or intimacy.

What I am suggesting is that these eleven cognitive activities constitute a type of common-sense rationality in making decisions or taking courses of action. Of course, there may be other activities which I have overlooked. I am not suggesting that any person always uses all of these activities in every decision or course of action.

I am suggesting that counsellors will "make sense" to clients more often in counselling if they pay attention to cognitive activities of consciousness such as I have outlined instead of trying to work from a rational-ideal model of decision-making. Such activities actually take place in the client's consciousness and are revealed through client statements. This means that the counsellor must possess the necessary linguistic and communication skill to assist the client to articulate those cognitive activities in the form of conversation, role-playing, graphics, and so on.

While there certainly is need for objective and new information in the counselling encounter, the more fundamental task is to assist the client to use his or her own cognitive activities and reorganize his or her own experience and knowledge in such a manner that it becomes more accessible, more coherent and less ambiguous. Such a counselling stance intends to aid the client to take what he already knows and knows how to do, and what he understands to be the case, and use it in a more effective way to decide and act. The decision-making perspective comes more from common-sense understandings than from formal models.