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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 elements of individual consciousness which seem to come into play as the individual is himself 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 ten 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", Economics, 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 consciousness.

What then, are some of the activities which go on in the consciousness of the individual who is "deciding" -- activities which more or less contribute to the making of a decision.

1. Categorizing and comparing

The person searches his or her own experience for memories of previous situations with which to compare the one now faced.

2. Searching for "means"

The person searches his or her own experience for "rules of practice" which worked in similar instances in the past and may be applied to the situation now faced.

3. Imaginative run-throughs

In his or her imagination the individual rehearses various courses of action and imagines consequences.

4. Forecasting changing circumstances

The person locates a set of "what to do in case of's" as a guide for dealing with changes in circumstance (Yes, I can apply for this job which is posted today but what if I do apply tomorrow and am told the job is already filled?)

5. Temporalizing

The person considers an action or decision by trying to schedule it along with other life activities and giving attention to reciprocal impacts. Now? Later? In one week? Twenty minutes? Or, "any time, it doesn't matter, one times as good as another."

6. Predictability testing

The person is concerned with "How certain is this anyway?" To reduce surprises, the person may try to use empirical evidence, gain greater clarity, gain commitment from significant others, or may eliminate all surprises by abandoning the decision or planned action.

No situation is ever totally clear, nor is one's experience of any event completely unambiguous. Yet all persons do seek a degree of clarity which is sufficient for present purposes.

8. Subjectivity-objectivity interplay

Persons make most decisions as a result of a fair amount of subjective interpretation of the situation, with or without objective comparisons. I may decide to apply for a job for my own private, subjective reasons even though objective information might contradict my subjective decision. Objectively, the job may require skills I don't have, pay less than I "need", be available only to members of the opposite sex--yet I still decide to apply. Persons vary in the degree and precision with which they match or mismatch subjective-objective factors in making a decision or in taking a course of action.

9. 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.

10. Cartesian rules vs tribal rules for deciding

"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 ten cognitive activities constitute a type of common-sense rationality in making decisions or taking courses of action. There, of course, 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 elements of common-sense consciousness such as I have outlined instead of trying to work from a rational-ideal model of decision-making. Such elements actually take place in the client's consciousness. 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.