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QUALITY OF WORKING RELATIONSHIP

[MANY OF THE IDEAS CONTAINED IN THIS PAPER ARE TAKEN FROM FISHER, R. AND BROWN, S. (1988). GETTING TOGETHER: BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AS WE NEGOTIATE. NEW YORK: PENGUIN BOOKS].

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One of the basic concepts of sociodynamic counselling¹ is that the relationship which exists between counsellor and client is exactly the relationship which the two persons "construct", no more and no less. This relationship is called the "helping alliance" partly to stress the fact that both counsellor and client share a common, overreaching goal--that is, to achieve improvement in the client's life--concern which brought about the need for counselling in the first place; and partly to stress that a good role for the counsellor to take in regard to the client is that of ally, or at least, potential ally.

The helping alliance can be conceptualized as a composite of two different but overlapping relationships: the therapeutic relationship and the working relationship. The therapeutic relationship is concerned more with the emotional experience of the client and the place of emotions in the counselling process as they relate to the counsellor-client bond. However, it is the working relationship which I am concerned with in this paper.

The "working relationship" refers to the process by means of which agreements and decisions are made, both implicitly and explicitly, on how to work together for the purpose of solving problems or concerns which the client brings to counselling and refers to the process by means of which differences of opinion and perspective are handled by the counsellor and the client.

Although many counselling approaches do not take into account the fact that much of counselling has to do with negotiation of agreements (such as "Is this the time to discuss what your next step is in finding a new job?") or the resolving of differences ("your view is that I should be able to fix things up for you, my view is that unless you are able to stay committed to your plan there is not much chance that you can stay in the training--I guess we see it differently", a careful examination of what counsellors and clients say to each other, and how they say it, leaves little doubt that a large portion of counselling discourse is about agreements,

¹Peavy, R. V. (1988). Sociodynamic counselling. Department of Psychological Foundations, University of Victoria. Mimeo, 35 p.

disagreements, decisions, communication break-downs and meta-communication--all of which can be put under the general heading of "negotiating the reality of the counselling process."

What kind of agreements counsellor and client are able to arrive at, and how they handle differences of opinion (in other words, what kind of negotiations are possible) intertwine with the kind and degree of rapport and emotional contact each feel that they have with the other. The "therapeutic" aspects of the helping alliance cannot be completely separated from the "working together" aspects, but in the rest of this paper, I am attempting to focus primarily on the working together aspects.

We can begin to understand the importance of the working relationship in counselling by making two distinctions. First, it is essential to distinguish a) the person from the problem, and b) the relationship from the substantive issues which are brought up in the counselling conversation. Failure to distinguish between issues of relationship and issues of substance can lead to many undesirable consequences in counselling such as confusion, power struggles, and general deterioration of the counselling process.

A second useful distinction is the difference between an attitude of conditional constructiveness and unconditional constructiveness on the part of the counsellor while working with clients. From the standpoint of effective negotiation in counselling it is extraordinarily useful to adopt an attitude of unconditional constructiveness. What this means in the context of helping is that, as counsellor, I should first of all do those things which are good for our working relationship and only secondarily try to do those things which are good for me (and, perhaps for you). It is not much of an overstatement to say that the real client is our relationship. If our working relationship is sound, then we have a strong base on which to problem-solve, sort out our differences, and find sensible resolutions for difficulties.

One way to strengthen a working relationship is to examine its ability to cope successfully with differences by taking a posture of unconditional constructiveness toward clients. The following ten guidelines are meant to be a general outline and guide to using unconditional constructiveness in the counselling interview.

1 Try to include both emotional feelings and rational thinking and perceptions when discussing differences and seeking agreements. The trick is to achieve a balance between emotional feelings and rational, logical thought in problem solving discussions. Emotions are normal, necessary and often essential in problem-solving. On the other hand when emotions flood thinking processes the consequences are often confusion and blind action.

2 Work for each person's understanding of the other's point of view. Understanding in itself does not mean agreement; however,

it does provide a sense of fairness and increase the chances that agreements can be negotiated and adhered to.

- 3 Use effective interpersonal communication as a tool for reaching understanding and for resolving differences. The ability to communicate clearly, openly (non-defensively), concretely (specific and to the point), explicitly (direct and without undue assumptiveness), honestly (without deception or manipulation) compassionately (with a concern for the welfare of the other), and an ability to display a sensitivity to the cultural nuances of the other's language and manner of expression are potent factors in effective communication.
- 4 Maintain reliability. This means, for example, don't make promises which you cannot deliver on. Agreements entered into lightly are often worse than not having agreements at all. Interpersonal trust is very important in the working relationship and must be built up through reliable speech and actions over a period of time. Trust seldom occurs spontaneously and may be only a type of "blind" trust. By acting communicating in a trustworthy and reliable manner, the helper can increase the probability of achieving effective outcomes with the client.
- 5 Use non-coercive means. In working with clients, it is much better to be persuasive than coercive. For example the counsellor can try to persuade a client to commit to a particular goal or direction by providing examples, by clarification of issues, by educating the client, by identifying positive consequences of taking the action or choice being advocated, by moral persuasion, by logical argument (ala Albert Ellis). Within the context of counselling such persuasion can be seen as an attempt to foster voluntary cooperation. At the other extreme, the counsellor can use threats, dwell on dire consequences of doing or not doing a certain thing, or of taking a certain choice, can issue warnings, and can use various forms of psychological "force" to try to get client compliance or agreement. Coercive means of influence are likely to represent only the interest of the more powerful member of a relationship. It is likely to seem legitimate only to the person using coercion. The less coercive our means of influence, the better the chances are that we will be able to work well together.
- 6 Strive for mutual acceptance. If counsellor and client are to achieve sensible agreements and work out differences of opinion, then it helps to build acceptance. Feelings of worth, value, being accepted, and legitimation are basic human psychological needs. If you want a client to "deal" with you, and to take you seriously, then it is important to 1) listen to what the client's views and feelings are, 2) accept the client's right to have the views (you don't have to approve or agree

with the client's views) and 3) take the client's views, interests, and needs into account as you try to forge agreements and settle differences with each other.

Of course you cannot expect each client to be initially reciprocal in such efforts; however if you steadily maintain your non-manipulative efforts to show your acceptance, then you are presenting an influential model to your client.

- 7 Recognize that approval of another's views is not required. A good working relationship should be able to survive the fact that as counsellor you may strongly disagree with, or disapprove of, a client's views. As long as you are able to accept the client's right to hold the views he or she holds, then it is not necessary for you to either approve or compromise your own perceptions. It is common for persons to want to "break off" relations with others whose opinions they disapprove of. This eliminates any further opportunity for negotiation or working together and should be avoided if possible.
- 8 Shared values are helpful but not required.

I have often been told by counsellors that they were unable to work with a client because "we have such different values". Obviously, it is helpful if client and counsellor hold similar values. However, often this is not the case and I do not think we can, or should, try to confine our problem-solving abilities to that population of clients with whom we share similar values. Holding differing values will require that the counsellor carefully distinguish between values, approval, and respect. It also calls for putting more effort into understanding what the other's values are, and what part the values and value differences actually play in the decision making and problem solving processes that the counsellor and client are engaged in.

A good example of clear value differences in counselling is the case of a counsellor[who is strongly imbued with the value of individual responsibility and decision making] working with an Asian client[strongly imbued with the value of family decision making in which the opinion of elders is overriding]. The question is, "how does the counsellor conduct him or herself in this counselling situation so that the value differences do not constitute a barrier to understanding and negotiation which cannot be overcome?"

9. Perceive the relationship as a process separate from the topics discussed, the goals sought, and differences negotiated.

In counselling we can pursue relationship and substantive goals independently. Sometimes we have to forgo, temporarily, a treatment plan(substantive goal) in order to build and validate a working relationship. It is a common mistake to make relationships

contingent upon agreement. "You do this and then we can work together". It is better to take the reverse tactic. That is, begin by asking oneself what decision one would like the client to make and then consider what one can do (often relationship building) to make that decision or agreement more possible. This has the distinct advantage of remaining focussed on one's own behavior, which it is possible to exercise some control over.

10. Think twice before granting concessions, doing favors, or "purchasing" a better working relationship.

A client came for counselling because her boyfriend had moved out. She took the position that "Our relationship was the most important thing in the world to me, so I was willing to go along with whatever he wanted. How could he leave me?"

The counsellor said something like: "You know, it takes two to have a relationship. If you gave in on everything, where were you in the relationship. If your boyfriend wanted someone who had interests, values and substance, then if you gave in to him at his slightest insistence, you must have seemed like a pushover--your giving in may have been satisfying at the moment, but overall probably did not make a very satisfying relationship."

Giving in may avoid arguments but it eliminates the opportunity to engage in problem-solving and negotiation.

Granting personal "favors" may have some immediate benefit, but over the longer run, it is a risky method of gaining agreement. No one likes the feeling of being bribed.

Trying to purchase a relationship by some psychological "payment" such as "well, I'll go along this time with your decision [just to prove what a good guy I am] is a bit like making blackmail payments. The more one pays, the more one is likely to be expected to pay. Conversely, to ask payment [if you show up for your next appointment on time, that will prove that you value our counselling relationship] from the other is just as likely to damage as to build a relationship.

Giving in, granting favors, trying to buy as relationship tactics usually either stem from mixing up relationship issues with substantive issues or focussing on short-term gains at the expense of long-term, more lasting benefits. In counselling, the working relationship is a process involving a balance of emotion and reason, understanding, reliability, non-coercive means, acceptance and distinguishing between relationship and substantive issues.

So far in this paper I have been stressing the value of taking an unconditionally constructive attitude when working with clients. The following table outlines the main points of such a strategy.

AN UNCONDITIONALLY CONSTRUCTIVE STRATEGY

Basic premise: A counselling(working) relationship will be more effective if the counsellor does those things which are, first of all, good for the relationship, and secondly good for the counsellor and client---whether or not the client reciprocates.

1. Present a problem-solving attitude which attempts to account for(and balance) emotion and reason. Even with clients who are only emotional.

2. Resolve to understand the client and client's concern and viewpoint even if the client takes an attitude of "no one understands me" or seems bent on deliberately misunderstanding.

3. Use effective interpersonal communication:

Do

Dont

Listen in order to understand

Assume understanding

Consult and negotiate

Impose decisions

Recognize feeling messages

Ignore feelings

Use client-suited language

Use officialese

Convey respect

Demand respect

Clarify

Complexify

Model non-defensive commun.

Invoke defensiveness

4. Be reliable. Even when clients are trying to deceive or are unreliable, neither trust nor deceive them. Instead, remain reliable. Reliability fosters reliability. Trust must be built--it should not be assumed and will not come about magically.

5. Stick with non-coercive means. Don't be afraid to persuade, remain open to having your mind changed too. Don't allow yourself to be intimidated or pressured by clients using coercive means.

6. Practice acceptance. Even when a client is rejecting or non-acceptant toward the counsellor, it is still best to try to maintain an attitude with the components:

"I accept you as a person worthy of my time and attention"

"I care about you and about what happens to you"

"To the best of my ability I intend to stay open to you"

"Being acceptant makes me feel good, it may help our relationship, and there may be some benefit to you".

In the following section of this paper, I will present a checklist by means of which you can examine, think about, discuss, and (possibly see how you can improve) your own approach to working relationships within the context of counselling and with fellow-workers.

WHAT IS THE QUALITY OF OUR WORKING RELATIONSHIP?

Use of this checklist: First, think of a client (or fellow-worker) whose relationship with you has some importance for you; then read through the items below, making a brief evaluative comment after each one with reference to your relationship with the person you have selected. When you have finished, consider which of your answers you would like to be able to change and what steps you can take to do that. Another way to use this checklist is to co-evaluate with a fellow-worker. This requires an openness, sensitivity and willingness to hear both "good news" and "bad news" about your relationship ability from a trusted colleague.

RELATIONSHIP GOALS

1. Am I attempting to improve our relationship? _____
2. How well do we resolve differences? _____
3. How often do I think about improving the process of our working together over the long term? _____

GENERAL RELATIONSHIP STRATEGIES

4. Do serious content issues disrupt our ability to work together? _____
5. Do I tend to feel like "getting even" with you or retaliate when I feel ignored or left out of mutual decisions? _____
6. Am I inclined to ignore "relationship" problems with you or do I actively bring them up and try to negotiate a remedy? _____

BALANCING EMOTION AND REASONING

7. Awareness: Do I know what emotions (yours and mine) are affecting our relationship? _____
Do I openly acknowledge your feelings? _____
Mine? _____
Do I try to include both feelings and ideas in our discussions or do I have a strong preference for one to the exclusion of the other? _____
8. Effect: How are emotions (yours, mine) helping or hurting our working relationship? _____
Are my emotions enriching or endangering our working together? _____

QUALITY OF UNDERSTANDING

9. How much do I show empathy (understanding) toward your interests? values? ideas? motivation? concerns? _____
10. How well can I paraphrase what you say to me? _____
11. How much do I feel understood by you? _____

QUALITY OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

12. Am I a consistently attentive listener? _____
13. Am I good at communicating in a clear and personal manner, sensitive to your cultural/language nuances? _____
14. Do I consistently include you in discussion of decisions which will have an effect on you? _____
Do I model non-defensive communication? _____
Do I present reliable information in our discussions? _____
If necessary, do I help you to express yourself? _____
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CREDIBILITY AND RELIABILITY, HOW MUCH CONFIDENCE DO YOU HAVE IN MY FUTURE CONDUCT?

15. Do I consistently keep my commitments to you in terms of time place, agreements and concern for your welfare? _____
16. How much do I value trust in our relationship? In what ways do I perceive myself to be trustworthy? Where do I fall down? _____
17. What risks do I incur in relying on you? _____
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POWER IN OUR RELATIONSHIP (coercion, imposition, persuasion, status)

18. How much do I use or avoid using threats, warnings? _____
19. How do I regard myself in relation to you insofar as comparative expertness is concerned? _____
20. Do I tend to "pull rank"? What are my main "status" claims-- my age, experience, training, position, intelligence, moral values, certification, gender, street savvy, etc? _____
21. How often do we seem to be in a "power struggle"? _____
22. To what degree am I aware of your power needs? _____
23. What are my favorite "power moves"? Do I use them in our relationship? _____
24. How good am I at being persuasive without at the same time being coercive or manipulative? _____
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QUALITY OF MUTUAL ACCEPTANCE

25. How strong is my acceptance of you as someone with whom I can deal in a straightforward and accepting manner? _____
25. Do you matter to me? Is it my perception that I matter to you? _____
26. Am I able to accept you as a person even though I do not agree with you and even though I sometimes disapprove of your actions? _____
27. How "mutual" do I perceive acceptance to be with us? _____
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This set of guidelines can be used to review any working

relationship, whether in counselling or with fellow workers. Even with short term relationships, it is well worth the time taken to "audit" how the relationship is setting up--what needs changing? What are the strong points of our relationship? Am I satisfied with my relationship ability--with clients? with co-workers?

As a final tool for developing your own ability to form good working relationships, I will suggest a method which I call "Journaling your relationships". This method consists of three steps:

First, select a relationship which is important to you, but which you would like to be even better.

Second, reflect on your recent experience of the relationship in question, including satisfactions and dissatisfactions.

Third, using the six categories of Emotions, Understanding, Communication, Reliability, Persuasion, and Acceptance make notes on how you might be able to act differently, or change your perceptions so that the result would improve the relationship, especially your ability to handle differences and get good agreements.

I will first present an example of journaling and then I will present an "empty" form for you to work from.

JOURNAL NOTES TO MYSELF about how I can help R. and myself deal

with our disagreements and help us to improve our decisions and commitments (R. is a client).

EMOTIONS I haven't been paying attention to my feelings of frustration and impatience with R's wanting to prolong our counselling--need to bring this out in the open

UNDERSTANDING

Keep putting myself in R's shoes? Especially need to convey my understanding of the progress he has made--

COMMUNICATION

Keep working on helping him to remain specific - have to watch out for both of us getting side-tracked. Keep on listening!

RELIABILITY

I feel really good about my job in keeping my commitments to R. R is doing better in keeping appts, too.

PERSUASION/POWER

Watch out that I don't sucker in to R's need for me to "fix" things for him. Watch my "barbed" humor.

MUTUAL ACCEPTANCE

Remember to acknowledge R's ideas. I must stay open to R and at the same time keep a straight forward, you're not fooling me approach - I think he respects that.

JOURNAL NOTES TO MYSELF

ON HOW I CAN HELP _____ AND MYSELF HAVE A BETTER WORKING
RELATIONSHIP

EMOTIONS

UNDERSTANDING

COMMUNICATION

RELIABILITY

PERSUASION/POWER

ACCEPTANCE

MORE NOTES: