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## SPECIALIZED SOCIAL COUNSELING – KEY ELEMENTS

**Abstract.** The aim of the article is to indicate the general characteristics of the key elements of the social counseling process. To accomplish this task the authors used professional literature and one of the co-authors' professional experience in his field of study. František Drozd has been practicing social counseling in Slovakia for several years. His experience has allowed him to competently determine the key factors in the counseling process. These are: (1) ambient conditions and taking into account the time factor; (2) properly conducted interview; (3) the relevant contract with the client and skillful completion of the counseling process, and (4) ethical principles in the counseling relation.

**Key words:** social counseling; counseling process; social counselor; client of social counseling; counseling conversation

### INTRODUCTION

The term “counseling” is derived from the word “counsel”, which may lead to an erroneous conclusion that a counselor is someone who offers advice, ready-made solutions, who has at his disposal means that can immediately help the client to control the situation or to solve his problem. The counselor's task is to listen to the client's statement of his expectations, to evaluate them objectively and offer an active participation in solving the problem. A social counselor may support, inform, educate, create proper conditions for a change. His task is to aid the client in examining various alternative options of a constructive change. He should be then a sort of a catalyst for solving the problem. A social counselor should respect the client,

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accept the fact that he is different, empathize with his current situation, motivate and stimulate him to change, and expect a common search for possibly the best patterns of behavior and functioning in the world, as these are the fundamental conditions of such an approach. Hence elimination of pathologies, help in achieving independence, the client's personal development, improving the quality of life, meeting the needs of a poor person, the person's mental and physical health, mobilizing the "healthy" sources of the client's natural environment are the basic goals of counseling.<sup>1</sup>

The aim of the article is to indicate and to characterize in general terms the key elements of the process of social counseling. To accomplish this task – apart from the literature of the subject one of the co-authors' professional experience has been used: František Drozd has been practicing social counseling in Slovakia for several years. The knowledge that he has acquired in that time allows him to competently define the basic factors of the counseling process. They are: (1) proper external conditions and taking into consideration the time factor; (2) a properly held counseling conversation; (3) concluding an adequate contract with the client and a skillful conclusion of the counseling process; and (4) observing the ethical rules in the counseling relation.

### 1. EXTERNAL CONDITIONS AND THE TIME FACTOR

The effect of the counselor's work with the client to a considerable degree depends on the external conditions in which the counseling process is going on. It is best if the counseling center is situated in some separate rooms with silence prevailing. If a social counselor does not have proper space he should choose the strategy of consulting the client in the client's own environment, where finding a place securing anonymousness is possible. A client waiting for his visit or consultation should not be exposed to public sight. The best place for the seats is a corner, especially if some armchairs or comfortable chairs are put there. This kind of seats induces trust in the client, it creates an informal atmosphere and helps the client openly talk about his private problems.

The time factor is an important element of the counseling process. The client and the counselor perceive time cosmologically or internally. These two times do not have to be synchronous. The internal time may subjectively flow very fast or very slowly. It is felt in a different way by a depressed person

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<sup>1</sup> Ján Gabura, *Teória a proces sociálneho poradenstva* (Bratislava: IRIS, 2013), 13.

and by a person in the manic phase of bipolar disorder. Many counseling approaches are focused on the present. Counselors try to reconstruct it and free the client of the sense of fatality of the past and the future. Only after bringing back and understanding the mechanisms of the past the counselor and the client may be focused on the present and the future.<sup>2</sup>

The time of individual work with the client should range from 45 to 60 minutes. The counselor should keep to the planned time of the consultation, and the work with the client should have its continuity. This is why what was not solved at one meeting has to be examined during the next one. If it is necessary that the time continuity should be more intensive, between the consultations the counselor can keep in touch with the client by means of a register or a variety of kinds of homework set to the client. Keeping to the planned time of the consultation is also a certain test element in the counselor-client relation. For example, the client may regularly be late, or come late only in some definite situations. The counselor should not overlook this information, he should write them down and talk to the client to get to know what may be the reason of such a way of managing the time. It should be remembered that an inner battle is sometimes fought in the client. He needs and he wants to use the definite system and structure, but at the same time he resists it. The counselor should also respect the established time limits. Unlike an individual meeting with the client, a visit of a family is sometimes longer, and the time the meeting lasts ranges between an hour and a half and two hours. A group needs more time to start talking and more time is necessary to make as many participants in the consultation as possible speak or act.

The element of time in the counseling process should be overt, or if not, the process will seriously suffer. It is worth noting in this context that looking at the watch furtively is the counselor's frequent fault; it may significantly hamper work that is going on well. The counselor may look at the watch, but only at the beginning, in order to tell the client how much time is left to the end of the consultation.

Information about the estimated time of the counseling process is still another element of the counseling contract in the discussed aspect. Clients often ask how long they will visit the center and how long the solving of their problem will last. The counselor should be able to approximately establish the duration of the counseling work or, at least, of its first stage. A client may have a variety of notions about the length of the counseling aid, a variety of expectations that he should objectivize and realize.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 131.

## 2. THE COUNSELING CONVERSATION

During the counseling conversation the client presents his problems. The counselor listens actively, tries to understand the client, gives him support and inspires him to make changes. Throughout the conversation he tries to create the atmosphere of openness and trust that makes it possible for the client to talk even about his private matters, with the client being aware that the information will be kept confidential. During the interview the client presents a lot of apparently unimportant information, and sometimes he even simply remains silent. It should be remembered that any client's behavior has its significance and it is required from the counselor that he would be able to understand all that he hears and sees.

For most clients the fact that they are not left alone with their problems is much more important than receiving advice and solutions from the counselor. An experienced counselor knows that if the client had to face his problem for a long time, sometimes for years, the problem cannot be solved during one visit. The counselor accommodates himself to the client's pace and gives him sufficient space for being able to present his problems also during the next meetings. In his therapy the counselor may go as far as the client will allow him to. The pace of this process is defined by the client, and a good counselor can accelerate it or slow it down according to his needs, abilities and possibilities. The conclusion of a counseling conversation should happen in the atmosphere of trust and of easing the tension; the client definitely should not leave the counseling center being anxious or in a dilemma.<sup>3</sup>

Several types of conversation are distinguished:

- collecting information – its goal is to achieve or give information, to broaden one's own knowledge or that of the partner;
- ventilating – it serves reducing the tension and showing dissatisfaction or unpleasant feelings;
- motivating – it motivates the client to work on his problem in order to make changes;
- coaxing – its aim is to convince the client he should implement changes, to convince him about the necessity and appropriateness of them, and to activate the client to make them;
- assessing – it is used for assessing the relations, the results of the process;

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Eva Mydlíkova, *Sociálne poradenstvo, metodika evidencie a dokumentácie* (Košice: KSK 2013), 9-10.

- supporting – it helps to positively improve the client’s abilities, to develop his skills and actions that lead to better experiencing his problem;
- counseling – it makes possible obtaining further information and skills that are necessary to successfully cope with the part of the client’s life that causes problems;
- diagnostic – it helps to figure out what is going on in new situations and understand the situation when accepting new decisions;
- classifying – it explains more broadly and thoroughly aspects of the client’s problems or the problems of his relations.

The systematic therapeutic approach often makes use of conversation as a therapeutic method. According to this approach a conversation should have a constructive character and progress gradually, in certain stages. Every constructive conversation is divided into the following stages:

- Stage 1 – Order: the client makes an order by means of stating an initial expectation.
- Stage 2 – The counselor’s offer: the counselor responds to the client’s expectations and defines his possibilities with respect to the expectation.
- Stage 3 – Negotiations: adjusting the client’s expectations to the counselor’s possibilities. The counselor has to be able to define his precise limitations and possibilities and clearly present them to the client.
- Stage 4 – Entering a contract or accepting an order: it defines the responsibility of the counselor and the client for a specific problem; and then searching for its solution.
- Stage 5 – An own dialog that aims at reformulating the problem by achieving a change of the opinion. The goal here is to move the core of the problem, to change the client’s point of view on the problem.
- Stage 6 – The final report: it issues from the client’s initial order, recapitulates the course of the conversation, changes the way the problem is seen. If it cannot be achieved, other variants, not yet presented, will be suggested.

### 3. A CONTRACT WITH THE CLIENT AND CONCLUDING THE COUNSELING PROCESS

A contract is a part of the counseling relation and the process with the client that is connected with it. It is a form of agreement between the client and the counselor. It is usually concluded at the end of the first visit, after

the problem and the counseling possibilities are presented and after making a working diagnosis. The form of this agreement-contract may be written or oral.

The organizational, pragmatic conditions are part of the contract and they include: the frequency of the client and the counselor's meetings, the length of the consultations, cooperation with other people as part of the therapy, payment, tasks carried out at home in the form of homework. Also formulating specific and attainable goals after which the therapy should strive, that is done by the client, is an important part of the contract. The conditions and possibilities of "coming back" to the counseling process during and after the return should be specified beforehand in the contract. Also ethical rules of the counseling relation, including the possibility and form of its conclusion, are an inherent part of the contract. The whole therapy process depends on a number of factors, e.g. – if the therapy is done with one person or with a group, if it takes place in the field or on the premises of an institution, if we work in the preventive or intervention systems, if the client has come on his own initiative or if he has been sent by someone, etc.

The counseling process basically may be concluded in two ways: successfully or unsuccessfully. The degree of success depends on achieving particular counseling goals and the degree of the client's and the counselor's satisfaction with its results. In work with social clients it is much more often than in psychological services that clients return to the counselor after some time. After solving the problem the counselor also watches the development of the client's situation. Usually by sporadically contacting the client or somebody belonging to his circle by phone or personally he gathers information about the development of the case. This is a catamnestic study of the case, which may largely contribute to preventing social problems of an individual and of the society.

#### 4. ETHICAL RULES IN THE WORK OF A SOCIAL COUNSELOR

As it was mentioned above, also ethical rules of the counseling relation are an important element of a contract. A man in general, as a creature gifted with free will and reason, in his life experiences a fundamental moral dilemma that is manifested in the question: "What I should do and why? What

makes an act morally good?”<sup>4</sup> In professions whose subject and object are people the ethics of such a specialist’s work is a part of his basic and indispensable qualifications.<sup>5</sup> The ethical code of a social counselor, like that of a social worker, first of all contains the requirement concerning his knowledge, skills, experience, protection of the client’s dignity, not tolerating prejudice, leaving complete power to the client, constant interest in the client, professional responsibility, responsibility for the standard of the services, cooperation with others and keeping his work strictly confidential.

In his relation with the client the counselor has to make attempts:

- not to harm the client;
- not to look for profits for himself in the counseling relation;
- to minimize “giving advice” to the client and to prefer an active approach to solving the problem;
- not to act in the name of his client and not to represent him in public;
- not to exploit his client financially, emotionally or abuse him sexually;
- to keep the collected information confidential;
- not to be under the influence of alcohol etc. during his work with the client;
- not to have racial etc. prejudice;
- not to be in the state of emotional crisis;
- not to expose his colleagues and other experts to ridicule;
- to develop his professional competences, his knowledge and skills;
- to work under the supervision of experts.

At the end it is worth stressing that in practice we encounter situations in which the client, apart from securing his bio-psycho-social needs, also requires spiritual support, that is referring to religious values. Spiritual requirements in social services (to which also counseling belongs), like prayer, reading the Bible, spiritual conversations, giving information e.g. about entering into sacramental marriage or about annulling it, about Christian sacraments etc., are the requirements that one should treat with proper respect and solemnity.

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<sup>4</sup> Adam Zadroga, *Współczesne ujęcia etyki biznesu w Polsce. Próba oceny z perspektywy teologii moralnej*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL 2009, 153.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Eva Mydlíkova, *Sociálne poradenstvo*, 9-10.

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