

PASTORAL COUNSELLING

An Integrative Model

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In this article, a model is presented for integrating contemporary psychotherapeutic techniques in pastoral counselling. The various techniques are adopted in function of the corresponding developmental stage in the counselling process. The specifically pastoral dimension in such a model emerges as integrative rather than additive.

Three Aspects of Counselling

Within every counselling situation, three factors are continuously present - the content, the technique, and the personal relationship counsellor - counsellee. From these three aspects of counselling - which may be termed the "what-how-who" - we can draw the corresponding requisites of an effective counsellor. In order to deal with the content or problem the counsellor has to be equipped with *knowledge* ("savoir") of human psychology. Employing techniques requires a mastery of *skills* ("savoir faire") through training and practice. And developing an optimal relationship with the counsellee presupposes personality qualities, a way of being ("savoir être").

Let us now apply these three factors to the *pastoral* counsellor. Concerning the content, he or she must be well-versed not only in psychology but also in theology and Christian experience. As to the relationship with the counsellee, the pastoral counsellor ought to know his or her own specific pastoral role, and what the counsellee expects in view of that role. But as to the technique, what constitutes a specifically pastoral approach? Is there a form of therapy originating more from theology than from psychology which has proved effective in counselling? Should we even in principle try to develop one? Would not that reinforce a spiritual-human dichotomy and tempt many well-intentioned ministers to cover psychological wounds with spiritual band-aids? We are not referring here to the content or to the interpersonal dynamics of counselling but to its technical aspect. A technique is a tool to be used as a means towards an end. And there is nothing degrading or incongruent in employing psychotherapeutic techniques for pastoral ends. On the

contrary, quite often we must resort to these techniques if we want our help to counselees to be truly effective, long term and in depth.

Which techniques?

The perennial problem remains, however, as to which techniques to adopt. We are besieged by so many various techniques popping up continually that we feel entangled in an endless labyrinth. A simple way out would be to ignore all these techniques and then rationalize one's reaction by dismissing them as artificial technological devices. A more serious and responsible attitude would be to view techniques as possible instruments, separating the many trash recipe techniques from the few scientifically proven methods. But this would still leave us with a good number of counselling techniques. So the next question is how to put all these techniques together without falling into a naive eclecticism. Is there a way of integrating these diverse approaches in a creative, dynamic way?

Unfortunately, practitioners have often adopted a unidimensional approach. Their starting point and uncontested presupposition becomes the particular techniques they adhere to. Then they use their counselling skills to apply their favourite technique to the variety of persons, problems and situations. They possess a tool and then they view every task in terms of how to make use of that tool. The reverse should be true. Depending on what the task is (counselling situation), what tools (techniques) ought to be used? And the answer would vary depending on the type of counsellee, the particular problem, the moment or stage of the counselling process, and also on the personality of the counsellor. Ultimately, the degree of effectiveness in counselling is proportional to the counsellor's ability to show adaptability and flexibility in the appropriate use of these multiple techniques.

Nevertheless, this "poly-technique" approach should not be conceived eclectically as a combination of fragmented bits and pieces patched up together in jigsaw puzzle fashion. An integrative technique should express a dynamic unity, a harmonious blend of various and varying parts into a whole. This would enhance maximum effectiveness which surpasses the arithmetic sum of the limited effectiveness of each individual technique.

A Proposed Model

How in practice is this integration to be achieved? Below I propose a model that I

have found helpful and effective in my counselling practice. I have constructed my model around Egan's initial development stages. According to Egan, there is the Pre helping stage where self-expression constitutes the counsellee's goal. Then from the Awareness stage (!) of self-exploration, the counsellee moves on to the Cognitive Re-Organization stage (II) of dynamic self-understanding, and finally to Behaviour Change (III) through decision-action.

These stages are not meant to be static, rigid and linear but dynamic, flexible and circular. This means that the transition from one stage to the next is an organic process whereby a succeeding stage presupposes, includes, and at the same time goes beyond the preceding ones. The moment and manner of the transition are flexible and are left up to the counsellor's adaptive skills.

At the *Pre-helping* phase, elements from *somatic* therapy may prove helpful in putting the counsellee in a calm, relaxed state. Some breathing and relaxation exercises may help to remove tension, develop body-awareness and produce a sense of physical well-being in general. These non-verbal exercises prepare the way for verbal self-expression. Encouraging *free association* at this point not only allows the counsellee to express himself or herself freely and spontaneously but it also offers the counsellor an opportunity to analyse the unconscious association, to observe the manner of expression, to capture the paralinguistic cues, to be attentive to the accompanying bodily signals, and especially to detect what is *not said*.

Stage I Techniques

Responding with Rogerian empathic understanding to the counsellee's verbal expressions makes the counsellee feel accepted unconditionally and creates a non-threatening atmosphere. The internal security that develops in the counsellee removes anxiety, inauthenticity, and the need for defensiveness. The conditions are 'sine qua non' for any counselling process to advance further. They are necessary though not sufficient for real effectiveness. Self-expression and self-exploration are essential and fundamental therapeutic processes but they remain a stage which other processes have to build upon but also go beyond.

At the first stage of awareness, Perls' *Gestalt* technique helps to expand one's consciousness. The counsellee becomes more aware of his or her here-and-now feelings. By experiencing, exploring and expressing their feelings, counsellees are emotionally "unblocked" and ready for deeper exploration and understanding.

Both the Rogerian and the Gestalt approaches attain important goals in the counselling process. But these are still intermediate goals which can - and should - lead to wider goals.

Stage II Techniques

For cognitive restructuring one needs forms of therapy that emphasize the cognitive determinants of behaviour. Beck's *Cognitive Therapy* together with Ellis' *Rational-Emotive* therapy stand out as the ones obviously indicated. By identifying the irrational beliefs that cause ineffective behaviour, one can help counsellees discard unfounded thoughts for their way of feeling and acting. This will supposedly produce the desired change.

At this stage, Berne's *Transactional Analysis* offers a powerful tool to help people understand themselves better and work towards a re-organization of their thinking and behaving. By formulating a vocabulary that expresses simply and accurately our ego states, life positions, games, scripts, time structuring, etc., T.A. has developed a useful technique to make us aware of - and eventually to change - mental attitudes.

At this second stage one may also make use of psychoanalysis, not so much the technique as some of its concepts. It may be beneficial to some patients' self-understanding to realize the power of the unconscious, the influence of their childhood experiences, the id-ego-superego formation, their defense mechanisms, and so forth.

It should be said, however, that these methods, based mostly on talking and explaining to the counsellee, may only reach the intellectual component of the counsellee's problem. Quite often, highly emotionally-charged resistances, especially when unconscious, cannot be easily overcome through cognitive processes alone. Hence, these techniques need to be supplemented by other in-depth, feeling-insufficient for total growth; Stage I techniques are necessary but insufficient for total growth, Stage II methods by themselves remain impotent in reaching the whole person unless they build on Stage I foundations.

Stage III Techniques

The first two stages remain incomplete and partial without each other - they are

mutually complementary. Together they pave the way to, while underlying, the third stage. As we know from our counselling experience, there are cases when counselees can get all the help they need the first two stages but not the third. But in many instances, particularly in pastoral counselling, they need to reach - or at least be initiated into - the third and final stage.

The third stage - behaviour change - can only take place if the counsellor has been effective in the first two stages. Moving directly to the third phase without going through the previous ones would only result in external change, in eliminating symptoms, in providing superficial recipes to solve problems. No deep, long-term effects would be expected. Any decision or action on the part of the counsellee would be short-lived unless it is rooted in personal awareness and dynamic self-understanding.

Hence, *behaviour therapy* so helpful and practical at this stage, would be truly beneficial only if preceded by some of the other techniques suggested for the previous stages. So by all means let us make use of the behaviouristic approach with all its variants, especially when dealing with educative or learning processes. But let us also relativize its value and view it within a larger perspective.

One might ask at what stage in our model would Assaggioli's psychosynthesis be applicable. It actually cuts across all the various stages. As a technique, it contains such a diversity of components that it lends itself easily to help counselees throughout the different moments in the counselling process. Awareness of the imaging, symbol utilisation, etc. Through self-identification, or "dis-identification", a cognitive restructuring occurs which gives new meaning and purpose. And the will has the capacity to be trained for any decision-action involving behaviour change. All this leads to a personal, spiritual and transpersonal syntheses. Psychosynthesis thus offers an excellent model for pastorally-oriented counselling.

The Pastoral Dimension

Having shown how various psycho-techniques can be integrated into a developmental model of counselling, the question arises: where does the pastoral, spiritual or Christian dimension fit in? The Christian perspective cannot be contained within a technique nor can pastoral/spiritual counselling be identified with one of the stages. Nor could it even be envisaged as a fourth stage in the form of another layer laid on top of the other three. So neither identification with, nor separation

from, the three stages adequately express the pastoral dimension in counselling. Rather it penetrates and permeates all. It transforms, enlightens, colours and gives full meaning to each by integrating them at a deeper level. If we were to illustrate this graphically, the various techniques would be represented in the form of concentric circles on a two-dimensional disk. The pastoral aspect would then transform this into a three-dimensional sphere.

The distinction we made at the beginning on the structural aspects of counselling - content, technique, relationship - becomes relevant here. For while the technique is adaptable according to the various development stages or moments in time, it is continuously influenced and coloured by the content and by the counsellor-counselee relationship. The pastoral of spiritual content of a counselling session specifies the orientation of each of the three stages: Self exploration, through awareness of God's presence in one's life; cognitive re-organization through self-understanding in the light of Revelation; and behaviour change motivated by faith, hope and love. The relational aspect of counselling attributes a special role to the counsellor and this creates the proper context conducive to a faith consciousness, a Christian perspective of reality and a behaviour change modelled on gospel values. All these factors make pastoral counselling specifically pastoral while respecting techniques as necessary, helpful instruments rather than viewing them as unwelcome strangers belonging to another world.

Conclusion

In this article I have limited myself to suggesting a tentative model for integrating various techniques in pastoral counselling. It is presented as a framework, a skeletal one perhaps that needs to be "fleshed" with real case-studies. Every pastoral counsellor, I am sure, has ample experience to provide concrete examples that illustrate and verify this model. As a reference framework, may it help clarify the role of techniques in both the structural and the development aspects of counselling, thereby contributing to a better understanding of the counselling process in general and of pastoral counselling in particular.

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