Mutual aid counselling: the helper principle at work

R. Vance Peavy*

INTRODUCTION

Mutual aid counselling is a model of cooperative counselling for adults which utilizes counsellor-client role exchange and embodies the 'helper principle'. This article presents a rationale and description of mutual aid counselling.

MINISTERING TO THE HELPLESS

Since the early 1900's counselling has developed in association with social casework and psychotherapy. In counselling, one person attempts to help another mainly through the use of skillful dialogue. Counselling differs from psychotherapy mainly in the severity of problems addressed. It can be argued that both counselling and psychotherapy are examples of social casework principles applied to the individual rather than to the social milieu. However they may differ, conventional forms of social casework, psychotherapy and counselling all imply a treatment approach in which experts minister to the helpless. Whatever the benefits of 'expert' treatment orientations, they exhibit one major flaw: they are inclined to reinforce helplessness on the part of help-seekers. In fact, social casework, psychotherapy, and counselling as professions require helpless others as their raisons d'être.

MUTUALITY IN COUNSELLING

All conventional counselling models utilize the counsellor-as-expert orientation which keeps help-seekers in the low status position which they bring to counselling in the first place. However, some counselling approaches have indicated that a degree of mutuality in the counselling relationship is desirable. Otto Rank (1936/1964) contended that a therapist should hold 'expertise' in check, thus making it possible for the client to utilize his 'will to health'. Rank's goal was to release in the client '... the impulse to free himself so that he may then continue on his own way' (p. 111).

* University of Victoria, Victoria, B.C., Canada.

Int J Adv Couns 2 (1979) 97-108. All rights reserved.

In a much more direct fashion, the client-centered approach developed by Carl Rogers (1961) advocates a ‘helping’ relationship based on congruence, empathy and positive regard. Such a relationship implies mutuality and de-emphasizes both the expert stance of the counsellor and the corresponding ‘helpless’ position of the client.

More recently, Boy and Pine (1976) have suggested that mutuality in counselling should be extended to make the counselling relationship equalized. In their view the counsellor can employ certain pre-counselling procedures which will enable the counselling relationship to become equalized. The procedures include orienting clients to an equal-status relationship, encouraging clients to become voluntarily involved in the relationship, presenting oneself as a counsellor democratically rather than authoritatively, and perceiving the client as equal to oneself. It remains unclear, however, how following these procedures would actually result in a relationship of equality.

Thus one may conclude that while mutuality in the counsellor-client relationship is an important factor in some counselling approaches, no model has been presented within conventional counselling which actually specifies principles and procedures whereby equality of relationship between counsellor and client can be obtained.

Lay Counselling

The recent advent of lay (non-professional) counselling de-emphasizes the ‘expert’ role of the counsellor. There is evidence that lay counsellors, in some settings, are as effective, or even more effective, than professional counsellors (Brown, 1974; Carkhuff, 1969). Carkhuff (1968) and Rioch (1966) have speculated about the reasons for lay counselling effectiveness. Lay counsellors are often closer to the distressed person’s style of life and thus are better equipped to enter actively into the help-seeker’s milieu. Because they have been successful in surmounting some of the difficulties which the help-seeker is facing, they are able to suggest sensible solutions. Since they have not been inducted into the professional mental set, they may have a greater degree of flexibility coupled with a practical attitude. Whereas the professional helper may be viewed by the help-seeker as very different from himself, the lay counsellor, on the hand, is often a peer and can function as a role model for the help-seeker. Finally, the professional counsellor may ‘excuse’ the client’s irrational or helpless behavior while the lay counsellor is more inclined to ‘demand’ that the help-seeker face up to his responsibilities.