

Psychosocial counselling

Counselling is....

Counselling as a concept is so widely used, that it is hardly meaningful without detailed specifications. Qualified counsellors and their associations undertake clarifications and set standards, but they can hardly have any substantial influence on the meaning and the use of the term by the public.

The lack of clarity of the term is, among others things, due to lay persons offering counselling services in everyday life.

In addition, certain acts are wrongfully called counselling, where, in fact, things are sold, taught or guided. It is not difficult, though, to show the dividing lines with professional counselling: it offers support that serves the client and is aimed at agreed objectives, it respects specific conditions and is practiced by persons who have specific counselling and professional qualifications.

Much less clear, however, is the definition in the discourse within the professional community. Counselling has developed such a multifaceted field of practice that some counsellors emphasize the common elements and consider counselling a generic term for various formats: specialist consulting, psychosocial counselling, coaching, supervision, organizational development. Others highlight the differences pointing out diverse target groups, methods and understanding of roles. There are good arguments in favor of both approaches, but they are not always free from professional interests, which may also impinge on the clarity of the concept of counselling.

Psychosocial counselling

In 1978 Richer writes: “Psychosocial counselling sees a human being in his/her entire psychosocial relations, entangled in inner conflicts such as social problems with partners and reference groups, both in the private domain and the world of work.”

In 2003 the federation for counselling (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Beratungswesen) defines the format with detailed descriptions as follows:

“ It (psychosocial counselling) deals, on a solid theoretical bases, with various development tasks and multifactorially caused problem- and conflict situations.” (...) “In the dialogical process, aimed at the development of competencies, the clarification and handling of emotions and at the change of structural relations that cause the problems.

- attainable objectives should be defined and reflected decisions should be taken,
- action plans should be developed that correspond to the needs, interests and abilities of the individual, the group or the organization,
- personal, social, organizational and environmental resources should be identified and employed, in order to achieve the laid down objectives or fulfill tasks,
- support should be provided in dealing with irresolvable pressures.

With respect to psychosocial counselling, the Swiss Association for Counselling (SGfB, 2010) states: “It supports a person’s individual efforts in the further development of his/her patterns of behavior and experience and the improvement of his/her personal state of mind, the interaction with his/her relational environment as well as the coping with all sorts of tasks in his/her life.

Development and differentiation of psychosocial counseling

The first counselling services emerged in Central Europe in the 1920’s. In Switzerland, for example, dedicated teachers began to support young people in choosing a profession. Counselling was offered on matters of education and relationships. It had a primarily informative function and provided knowledge in areas of life in which traditional experiences and knowledge no longer corresponded to the current social and economic conditions.

After World War II and especially in the 1960's, a wide range of counselling services came into being. This also applies to psychosocial counselling. It began to take on tasks for diverse age and target groups

- drug and alcohol addicts
- victims of violence and abuse
- homeless people
- people mourning
- couples, families, young people and the elderly
- women, men etc.

People in particularly challenging situations and questions about

- upbringing
- sexuality
- dealing with life's challenges
- education
- intercultural issues, migration
- health
- conflicts
- separation, divorce
- debts, etc.

Psychosocial counselling was provided by specialist, who possessed the necessary know-how in the area of their clients. Health advisory services were provided by carers, educational counselling by pedagogues, marital and family counselling by social workers. In addition to their field expertise, these professional groups began to make use of knowledge and methods relevant to counselling. They applied knowledge about improving relationships, communication, learning and change processes from new psychological and pedagogical approaches to their specific counselling activities, by A. Adler as of 1920 or C. Rogers as of 1940.

Clients often turned out not to benefit enough from the factual information they received with respect to their concerns. The counsellors increasingly began to broaden their repertoire of actions to accompany the clients in their process and to improve the effectiveness of the counselling. In this way, the dual aspects of psychosocial counselling, still valid today, were established. The counsellors have counselling and interaction competencies (knowledge and skills in the areas of communication, development and change, counselling methods etc).

Field-specific competencies (knowledge and skills in problem areas: such as education, phases in life and transitions, couple and family dynamics, drug addiction etc.)

Theoretical principles

Since, from the beginning, counselling competencies were applied in diverse fields of work (a.o. pedagogy, social work, pastoral care and medicine), its theoretical principles were, in addition to psychological schools and concepts, also influenced by these disciplines. Major influences came from sciences outside the fields of practice, for example anthropology (cf. Gregory Bateson about communication), sociology (cf. Niklas Luhmann about social systems) or the neurosciences (cf. . Antonio Damasio, Gerald Hüther, Manfred Spitzer about brain development, learning and decision making processes). The concepts and practice of present-day psychosocial counselling, therefore, have an interdisciplinary basis.

Approaches to counselling and counselling concepts

An approach to counselling is defined as a sufficiently consistent, comprehensive, detailed, unambiguously worded, solidly founded approach which has achieved a certain level of dissemination. The diversity of approaches nowadays is huge. This has essentially to do with people and their social environments being so diverse and their responding in many diverse ways. Learning and change processes can be initiated and supported in many ways. This pluralism makes it hard to assess the quality of each approach to counselling, which calls for standards across the various approaches. At the same time, this diversity is desirable, since it allows counsellors to bring to bear their specific competencies and to support their clients in flexible and in different ways.

In recent years, well-trained counsellors who have a solid knowledge of a specific approach and know how to apply it, have increasingly developed individual concepts for their specific counselling services, which they apply and reflect in their practice.

This concept is based on the “tree of science”, which demands a presentation and reflection of the following levels of abstraction.

META-THEORIES, BASIC ATTITUDE

Vision on humanity, ethics, epistemology, fundamental questions related to the philosophy of science etc.

GENERAL THEORIES

Development, learning, disease/health, communication, decision-making dynamics, conflicts and conflict management, general counselling theory, etc.

COUNSELLING THEORY, SPECIFIC APPROACHES TO COUNSELLING

Approaches to change and learning, counselling process, types of intervention, building relationships, etc.

ACTION MODEL/PRACTICE

Settings, roles, Inventory of methods, Evaluation, Quality assurance.

Differentiation from other forms of relationship building

Psychosocial counselling offers support with respect to reflection, orientation, planning, decision making and guidelines for action. It is resources-oriented and has preventive effects, is problem solving, and facilitates development. It offers services to individuals and groups who, in general, manage their lives autonomously, but who look for support in specific topical fields and questions, with respect to development issues and life crises.

It distinguishes itself from other counselling formats in that it focuses on people's concerns in their social contexts. It addresses the contents, the process and the objectives for which the client seeks advice. As opposed to medicine and psychotherapy, it offers assistance and support, but does not seek to cure the client, but aims at development of competencies in various areas. Psychosocial counselling looks at the clients' problems from the perspective of conflict and disorientation experiences and the way they can deal with them, but not from the perspective of concepts of illness.

Prospects for the future

Counselling has become for many a need and a necessity in many areas of our individualized and fast-paced world (cf. Nestmann and Engel). Since psychosocial counselling offers support, regulation of the market has become necessary, in order to guarantee professional quality and care of the providers of these services. An important step towards this concern was the creation of the Swiss Association for Counselling (SGfB, 2006) which as an umbrella organization lays down and checks quality standards for training courses and the professional activities of psychosocial counsellors. Until now, 2011, 18 training institutions and professional associations have been affiliated. In this way a new comprehensive quality label has been created which should have a regulating impact on the market with its services.

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