

Human Communication and Effective Interpersonal Relationships: An Analysis of Client Counseling and Emotional Stability

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Abstract

The study analyzed the role of interpersonal communication in client counseling environments, establishing emotional stability, and building lasting effective counselor-client relationship. Numerous studies reviewed indicate that the quality of interpersonal communication between counselors/psychologists and clients is significant in improving clients' self-esteem, emotional stability, interactional effectiveness, and responsive engagement. An extended literature review was conducted to analyze past communication patterns between counselors/psychologists and clients to evaluate the role of human communication in the quality of therapy and in the results achieved.

Based on content analysis of clients-counselors interactions and relationships, review of related literature, and personal interviews and discussions, it was determined that effective interpersonal communication is critically important in achieving clients' high level of recovery, speedy compliance, and enhanced self-awareness. This study clearly establishes that communication is a significant part of a successful counseling practice. Additionally, productive counseling largely depends on communication competence - the ability to articulate instructions and procedures clearly, persuasively, and consistently both verbally and nonverbally.

Keywords: Client-counselor relationships; Interpersonal effectiveness; Counseling strategies; Communication competence; Mutual engagements; Nonverbal communication; Counseling environment

Introduction

Researchers and theorists across behavioral sciences and communication discipline have consistently contended that effective communication skills and interpersonal competence are central to the delivery of high quality counseling and a decisive factor in determining client satisfaction, compliance, and recovery [1-3]. Specific empirical evidence was identified and advanced to support the role of effective communication in the counseling environment. For example, in recent years psychologists [4] conducted group and one-on-one interviews with clients, and the outcome was successful because of the role of interpersonal communication, which was instrumental to the level of clients' disclosure. As noted in different studies, the quality of interpersonal relationship between psychologists and clients is significant in improving clients' self-esteem, emotional stability, and interactional possibilities. Bolston pointed out that genuineness, empathy; reciprocity, acceptance, and respect of others are critical factors in addition to constructive communication. Together, they contribute significantly to clients' emotional intelligence and self-esteem. As a result of the positive correlation between communication and counseling outcome, many psychologists [5] strongly recommended integrating interpersonal and nonverbal communication skills in counseling training and therapeutic processes. Recent studies in communication and psychology stressed that training programs in interpersonal communication skills should be systematic and structured with varying degrees of interpersonal exchange, strategically designed at enhancement of knowledge about social control and self-validation [6,7]. According to Lang and Van der Molen analysis, the primary function of basic interpersonal communication in counseling practice is to comprehend, evaluate, and describe clients' problem, mental dysfunction, and situational disorders.

Studies conducted over the past two decades consistently indicate a close relationship between psychology and communication in the quest toward improving social skills and perceptual awareness [8,9]. Consequently, interpersonal competence, nonverbal and verbal communication skills are required in the first and second years

of a psychology education in higher education, because effective communication is the cornerstone of successful clients-counselor relationships. Additionally, basic counseling communication skills are critical to personality development and self-awareness. Lang and Van der Molen [4], Egan [8-10] stressed a correlation between advanced counseling and effective communication in facilitating clients' acceptance of new insights, recovery, and personal development. Essentially, communication and counseling skills fit within the helping model in psychology developed by Egan. This model is grounded in communication theory, consisting of three stages: problem clarification, gaining new insights, and strategies for treatment.

An extended review of related literature on client-counselor relationships strongly indicates a perception that productive counseling is the result of effective utilization of excellent communication skills in an interpersonal setting, which contributes largely to establishing a trusting relationship. Evidently, counselors, psychologists, and communication's expert agree on the role of interpersonal communication in building a mutually beneficial relationship which facilitates the quality of therapy. For example, established professions have historically engaged in counseling, maintaining a track record that lends credence on their professional ability and legitimacy. A number of psychiatrists argue from a medical perspective their understanding of mental and physical interconnection within the human system. Furthermore, some psychologists explained that their study of human situations has a scientific or empirical base, stating that their methodology contributes and informs behavioral, emotional well-being, and mental framework of clients. Social workers and academics maintain a position that mastery of content, promotion of ethical

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standard, integrity, and credibility result from effective and efficient communication in their interactions with others.

Literature Review and Theoretical Frameworks

Studies conducted over years provide historical perspectives on the content relationship between psychology and communication fields. Evidently, there are interdisciplinary views from engineering models involving telecommunications industry of the 1940s, and through scholarly contributions of psychology and related disciplines emphasizing the relationship among human emotions, perception, and non-verbal behavior in the 60s and 70s. Importantly, the findings of social theorists, sociologists, and behavioral scientists in the eighties validated the importance of communication in interpersonal relationships, stressing the role of language, culture, and interpersonal relations. In an empirical research of over three decades, Mohan et al. [11] noted the critical role of verbal and nonverbal communication in human behavior, especially in the areas of cognitive restructuring and social comparisons. Studies projected information technology as the focus of future communication theoretical development in the 21st century with tremendous benefit for human interactivity and development.

Furthermore, McGowan and Schmidt [12] stressed that interpersonal communication and effectiveness were significantly grounded in the psychiatric model, which is largely influenced by the findings of psychoanalytic theorists, such as Freud, Jung and Adler. While there were critics of Freud among researchers influenced by the behavior therapy movement, they acknowledged his recognition of the significant role of communication in client relationship, which continues to inform and support current practice and development.

Practice and Responsibilities: Psychology and Communication

Researchers maintain that counseling's over-riding objective is to reduce interpersonal, personal distress, or neurotic anxiety [12]. In order to carry out effective counseling function, a counselor needs a knowledge base which includes awareness of values, strategic communication strategies, and a good comprehension of contextual issues and influences which determine and underscore therapeutic plans developed by counselors. Employing strategic interpersonal communication skills, counselors can improve the "counselor-client" relationship so that clients are able to learn experimenting with new communicative strategies in their lives and relationships. Carkhuff and Berenson [12] noted that counselors must become effective communicators since the client's learning begins with self-awareness, effective interpersonal relationships, as well as ability to explain difficulties inherent in interpersonal situations. While people who are excellent communicators may not necessarily be effective counselors, they will have an understanding of the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and have a strong intuitive grasp of the behavioral elements which contribute to effective communication. Land and Van der Molen concluded that counselors who do not possess requisite training in communicating with clients, may not achieve or produce an acceptable outcome in counseling, thereby establishing lasting client relationships.

Conceptual Framework: Communication-Psychology

Earlier studies (Wright and Davis, 1994) indicate that counselors need a conceptual map of a client's personal life space in order to equip him or her with appropriate skills and physical attractiveness.

Furthermore, counselors need to focus their attention on the client's existing interpersonal skills, assess his/her strengths, and help in explaining situations by making concepts cognitively relevant and appropriate through the entire counseling process. With this level preparation, clients are able to improve their interpersonal relationship and communication skills.

Therapeutic Relationships: Interpersonal Communication Effectiveness

In their research Wright and Davis concluded that therapeutic relationships between counselor and client differ from both a social and intimate contexts [13]. Counselors maximize their communication skills, understanding of human behaviors and personal strengths to enhance their client's growth. The focus of the relationship is on the client's ideas, experiences, and feelings. In this relationship, counselors and clients identify areas of mutual exploration and occasionally assess the degree of change needed by client. Interpersonal and non-verbal communication skills and knowledge of the phenomena happening in a therapeutic environment are essential process in the formation and maintenance of counselor-client professional engagement. As Egan explained, in the context of mutual and helping relationship, the following variables occur: The needs of the client are identified and explored, alternate problem-solving approaches are taken, new coping skills may develop, and behavioral changes are encouraged.

Another study, it was determined that counselors comply with prescribed instructions and guidelines to sustain a therapeutic relationship with a focus on the client. It was noted that the relationship between counselors and clients at this stage was not intended to comply with the counselor's requirements and expectations. Rather, clients' problems and situations should be explored and assessed, and potential remedies should be discussed by the counselor and client. As a result, a suitable solution and recommendation are analyzed and communicated to the client.

Social Relationships: Interpersonal Communication and Self Awareness

A social relationship is crucial to the sustainability of client-counselor relationship. According to Egan, the concept of social relationship is initiated for the primary objective of friendship, socialization, enjoyment, accomplishment of a task, or establishing a mutual and respectable relationship. Mutual needs are met during social interactions (e.g., participants share ideas, feelings, experiences, and social perceptions), contributing to expanded social capital. Harper and colleagues [14] stressed the role of communication in social interactions, maintaining that communication skills (verbal and nonverbal) are essential in social building relationships and for exploring interactional possibilities. Critical interpersonal communication skills include advising and meeting basic dependency needs (such as lending money and helping with tasks and assignments). Garmston noted that the content of communication between client and counselor might be superficial in nature. In the course of social interactions or interactional exploration, roles may shift between clients and counselors. In the context of social relationships, there may be minimal emphasis on the evaluation of the quality of interactions. A significant emphasis is placed in the initial encounter with clients on conducting counseling in an environment that fosters mutual trust, reciprocity, and respect. As with many relationships, Sharply pointed out that, trust is cultivated and nurtured by demonstrating genuineness and empathy, developing positive impressions, demonstrating consistency of behavior, and

providing support in reducing clients' emotional loneliness, situational shyness, and distress. This situation might be a brief development; but in many examples, it could take a stretch of time before clients are able to discuss and share their agonizing personal, family, or private experiences, thoughts, and encounters. Indeed, the ability to verbalize or communicate effectively plays an important role in achieving or sustaining self-discovery.

Communicating an Understanding of Therapeutic Relationship to Client

A number of studies noted that communicating an understanding of therapy and the nature of the therapeutic relationship has implications for clients-therapists engagement throughout the period of counseling or treatment [11,15]. Accordingly, the expressions used by therapists in structuring and defining relationships as well as how therapists and clients exchange messages or feelings are critical determining outcomes. In a research conducted more than six decades ago, Zeligs [16] determined that appropriate conceptualizations of clients-therapists relationship impact the behavior of therapists as well as influence the perspectives of clients about the whole concept of therapy and reactions to therapists. More often than not, clients come for therapy with preconceived notions regarding their involvement or participation in therapy as well as their expectations from therapists. According to Wright and Davis, these negative, suspicious, or unfriendly reactions of clients may result from past encounters and other factors (such as a client's previous experiences in therapy, sociocultural biases, or media representations). The authors noted that the existence of potential problems or issues in assuming that clients have adequate or substantial accurate assessment of the process of therapy and therapeutic relationships. For example, the information gathered by clients about therapy may contradict the methodology which clinicians use in performing treatment and/or evaluation, which could seriously impede the development of a successful therapeutic relationship.

Lang and Van der Molen [4] evaluated counseling as an art that involves a special helping relationship between counselors and clients in which interpersonal communication plays a critical role. It was noted pointed out that counselors' repertoire of skills includes intervention capability, focused on assisting clients modify specific aspects of their behaviors and actions through effective and efficient communication. Essentially, communication is an integral part of a successful counseling practice. Consequently, effectiveness of counseling relationship depends on counselors' skills in communicating clearly, persuasively, and concisely their overall impression or comprehension of clients' behaviors, issues, and problems.

Counseling Approaches: Silence and Feedback

In an empirical study conduct a few years ago, Sharpley underscored that there was an inseparable relationship between communication and counseling. In order words, there is an inextricable correlation between counseling competence and communication effectiveness. The author noted that the relationship between counselor and client requires a great deal of articulation or verbalization, using words appropriately to explore meanings, and employing nonverbal behaviors to solicit responses and action. All aspects of clients-counselors' conversations must involve skillful or creative speaking, listening, and body language. Indeed, it must be noted that there is hardly activities without conversations in the counseling process. Furthermore, in a study by Ivey and Authier, it was determined that silence is a primary part

of the interaction between counselors and clients, and that the use of silence significantly affects the outcome of therapeutic engagement or interaction. It provides an avenue to listen to the feedback provided by clients in most difficult counseling situations.

Nonverbal Communication: Silence and Facial Expression in Counseling

Among the forms of nonverbal cues, silence plays a very critical role in cultivating a relationship with clients and in analyzing their inner feelings as well as outward behavior. Given that silence has a therapeutic or negative connotation in the interpretation of client nonverbal communication, Zeligs differentiated between active and inactive silence modes, which gravely affect therapeutic relationships and the counseling process. Zeligs' interpretation of silence in counseling engagement is consistent with Roger's [17] earlier views about silence and timing. Rogers noted that in preliminary interviews with clients, silence and protracted pauses cause moments of embarrassment or anxiety, and do not help clients' unhealthy situations. The suspense created by silence in counseling compounds the uneasiness and nervousness of clients. It was pointed out further that, in subsequent contacts with clients, if effective communication was established between counselor and client, a counselor's silence could be a strategic and productive device in resolving issues and concerns of clients. Additionally, Pietrofesa et al. [18] stressed the usefulness of allowing adequate time for a client's response in a preliminary meeting in order to avoid creating a situation of "rescuing from silence." Because silence is a communication process which needs time to understand and to evaluate a client's behavior and intended motive, it is important to avoid misinterpretation of motives.

Explaining the "quality of presence" in dealing with clients, Mearns and Thorne described an intimate relationship between counselors and clients as a world of stagnant development which requires communication channels through nonverbal behavior specifically silence. The preceding study underscored the role of effective interpersonal communication in the counseling environment. The authors concluded that in the later phase of therapy, silence or non-verbal exchange between counselors and clients cause the healing process to occur, and it allows the development of inner peace. Rogers characterized this development as a defining quality of a responsive client [19-22].

In an empirical study of the role of nonverbal communication in counseling, Cook concluded that silence is a strong measure of the efficacy of the counseling process and the outcome. Cook hypothesized that "silence might well be a necessary condition, or at least an index of a necessary condition, for movement in psychotherapy" (p 42) [15]. The finding of this study demonstrated that a lack of silence caused unsuccessful results and that minimal communication with a client affected the outcome of a therapy. As a result, increased communication both verbal and nonverbal with clients was suggested for successful outcome in a relationship between counselors and clients.

Development of the Whole Person: Self Concept, Self-Awareness, and Self Esteem

Both qualitative and quantitative communication studies of recent years consistently determined that many organizations evaluated communication competence and skills as the most significant factor for cultivating human relationships in addition to improving job performance, productivity, and group cohesion [23-25]. Furthermore,

Beauchamp and Baran validated the critical role of communication skills in interpersonal situations, especially in problem-solving, conflict resolution, and human development contexts [26]. Educators, practitioners, researchers across a wide range of academic disciplines have attested to the role of communication in self-development, and they concluded that it is an indispensable skill set for reconciling even the most complex human conditions and situations. According to Walker, the ability to communicate effectively supports and enhances sound psychological development, especially as self-concept is acquired through interactions with families, colleagues, and peers. Additionally, achieving self-actualization is the function of communication which involves interactive activities, such as making contributions or participating in group or team projects, and applying interpersonal influences in collaborative undertakings as well as effective oral presentations. As human beings mature and become productive in different settings, communication competence and skills contribute significantly to their attainment of both career growth and professional recognition [27].

Concluding Remarks

Scholars and practitioners contend that individual communication styles guide a wide range of academic and professional interventions, provide personal validation, and enhance creativity in sustaining counseling-client relationship. For example, as a discipline which deals with human circumstances, counseling uses all forms of communication channels and strategies to manage and resolve situations and conditions. Therefore, effective counseling practice should have an expanded knowledge base, an awareness of the importance of interpersonal (person-to-person) communication, and an appreciation for empathetic and active listening. As Walker noted, effective counseling requires the development of values of tolerance, respect for others, and healthy self-awareness. Indeed, both communication and counseling involve deep understanding of human situations, including a thorough understanding of "action-based techniques and strategies to promote constructive interpersonal and group dynamics. Furthermore, counselors and psychologists require effective background in human and professional communication as well as effective tools for assessing the dynamics of addiction, sexual abuse, domestic-violence, complex issues of power, stress-related problems, lifestyle changes, and depression. Communication, whether interpersonal, group, verbal, or nonverbal, is a process of transferring feelings, beliefs, and situations between people in a strategic and thoughtful ways to achieve the intended result. This definition is especially important in a client-counselor relationship in which self-discovery, self-disclosure, and self-validation are contributing critical factors to building and sustaining the whole person.

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