THEMATIC ROUND TABLES ASSOCOUNSELING 2016-2018

On June 13, 2018 AssoCounseling released an issue of "Rivista Italiana di Counseling" (Vol. 5, Num. 1, June 2018) entirely dedicated to the work carried out between 2016 and 2018 by dozens of professionals.

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AssoCounseling's work tables and the meaning of this project

by Alessandra Caporale

In 2016 the contribution of several counselors, psychologists and psychotherapists made it possible to carry out **one of the most significant debates in the history of Italian counseling**. After an incubation of about thirty years – since the *debut* of the first counseling courses – during the 7th National Convention of AssoCounseling, **Oltre Antigone and Creonte**, held in Assago from March 18th to 20th, 2016, around sixty professionals gathered at working round tables and together tried to define the common elements of counseling, beyond the different approaches. Features we recognize ourselves in, regardless of the theoretical or orientation perspectives chosen singularly, as counselors. This is an unprecedented fact – we have no evidence indeed of any such experience before then.

The **Assago Paper** was born from this commitment: a reference document to define our profession and a starting point at the same time, to continue working with passion and determination. The Assago Paper highlights some of the elements that make the counseling process possible: trust, listening, suspension of judgment, humility and creativity, customization of the paths based on the needs, abstention from self-centredness in favor of the full centrality of the client. In the first part of the Paper we talk about the counselor who creates value, that is his ability to facilitate the process of self-realization with tools, techniques and personal qualities.

It immediately became clear to us that the words and concepts of the Assago Paper represented the beginning of **an argument-in-progress**, made of questions, conclusions and new starts, since we are aware that our profession, as well as our world, is constantly changing. We know that we can never talk about counseling without taking the context in which we move into account. And so on that spring day two years ago we got started, driven by the desire to continue to share, build a community and be of service to our association, to professional counselors, to those who are training and those who will come after us.

The work of the tables proceeded smoothly and uninterrupted thanks to the commitment of the professionals who had chosen to contribute with their time, energy, personal and professional resources and who accepted the challenge of giving up any self-centredness (considered by many of us a real threat to the evolution of the profession) to enter into a space of exchange, listening, sharing, transformation and evolution.

This work of "Community of practice" expresses its most authentic meaning when evaluated starting from **four key concepts**:

1) The importance of experience and self-reflection as a guide and development of knowledge through the practice and as a source of further knowledge*.*

2) The possibility of sharing common criteria and good practices regarding the Counselor profession and the Counseling process, and of increasing the awareness of one's role.

3) The opportunity to find some operational common ground beyond the theoretical reference models and make it the common language as a starting point for part of our identity.

4) The willingness to focus on the ethics of the profession and its typical acts, while recognizing the fundamental and inalienable value of freedom, creativity and uniqueness of the counseling process and of the ongoing relationship between counselor and client.

This last point is of particular relevance because, in the complex framework of professions, *it is necessary to refine methodologies, tools and practices to prevent them from being frozen into abstract principles*.

The document we are presenting is therefore the result of an **inter-peer work**, where the counselors share their experiences by examining different dimensions of the counseling process, a process we divided into three phases and their corresponding objectives, actions, tools, specific and across-the-board values and qualities.

This work also meets **AssoCounseling's need for supporting its members in the profession** of counselor with tools and researches aimed at fostering greater clarity regarding the role and good practices of counseling in Italy.

Respect for shared criteria, consistency among principles, rules, values and typical acts are the basis of an ethical action in every profession, and AssoCounseling's commitment is to use its strength to keep the central role of such level of consistency: in the relationship with the associates, to protect the clients, in institutional relations and with all the counselors' stakeholders.

It is our community's job to operate in order to make our work more and more identifiable and revitalize two words that have come up as central to our work with clients, but are first of all central to ourselves: **responsibility and change**.

This work is in progress and represents an invitation to take on a perspective of constant growth, an invitation to create value through experience, maintaining the objective of proceeding towards a stronger and more aware, free and autonomous professional community, in line with boundaries and clarity, to fully enjoy the many potentials that our profession offers us.

Enjoy the reading!

Alessandra Caporale
President of AssoCounseling

[Part One] Comparing counselors: the Community of practice from the Assago Paper to this day

by Alessandra Cosso

In the long history of humankind
(and animal kind, too)
those who learned to collaborate and
improvise most effectively have prevailed.
Charles Darwin

Mutations and natural selection
are not enough to understand life.
We also need cooperation.
This has been the main architect for four billions of years of evolution.
Martin Nowak

The History we are: stages and working methods

At first, when dozens of experts gathered at the Assago convention in 2016 to compare professional practices, we had no idea where this would take us. The path of the working round tables originated from a coming together of diverse views, languages and approaches which then stimulated the will to carry on with such moments, certainly challenging and not lacking intense debates and lively contrasts.

Still, **the need for interaction prevailed over diffidence and subjectivism**. And the importance of building a common identity, albeit with different methods, have become clearer and clearer to everyone. But how? How could we build a path of exchange and debate capable of generating a shared and integrated knowledge, up to the definition of a professional modus operandi we all may identify ourselves with?

The methods

Making the different minds talk to each other and then setting them into reality, comparing them in order to identify their tenuous common features and then a shared modus operandi beyond the different approaches and techniques: such has been, since the beginning, the greatest effort of our round tables. To hit the target, we developed a multi-faceted methodology, capable of exploring the central subjects on two different levels of thought: the narrative level and the logical-rational one (Bruner, 1987), so as to facilitate a process of *sense-making* to integrate freely and creatively the consciousness of the different approaches and models of intervention. At the same time, though, the

narration that emerged had to be compared with the presentation of reality, with the concrete and day-to-day problems faced by counselors.

During the 2016 convention the tables generated a document, the **Assago Paper**, gathering what had emerged from the intense exchange among the 5 tables and 60 counselors from all over Italy and even Europe – representatives from the *European Association for Counselling* (EAC) were present – to exchange views and pool professional experiences, both eventful and manifold. Two intense and passionate days of work by all participants, whose results have been condensed into a paper, concise and evocative, inspiring a moment of constant reflection on our profession.

On the same day we received the first proposals to carry on with the activities and move forward along the path, which generated consensus regarding interaction and exchange, with an agreement that included the willingness to consider the Other with respect, curiosity and interest, and the commitment to devote a few days to team working – which might be exciting but demanding, too. This is how we started the Round Table team, open to all colleagues with at least 5 years of experience as professional counselors and a background of research in the specific area of counseling and/or human science. But let's analyze how we worked, stage by stage.

Assago 2016: stage one

Assago, first event in a long series, was above all a moment of discovery. The discovery of **a shared need** beyond subjectivism and differences: trying to define ourselves collectively, investigating our being counselors to find a benchmark code for the definition of a shared modus operandi in addition to the shared being.

The round table took place between Friday afternoon and Saturday; each table included an expert facilitator leading the team along a process designed to optimize the time available, facilitate a reasonable processing and meet the goals of the table which were two, basically:

1) trigger an exchange to generate a paper no more than two folders long (suitable for the convention's records and the plenary session presentation scheduled for Sunday morning);
2) identify a few key points to be included in the "Shared counseling paper".

A narration on identity, born in Assago, that has been evolving over time (the convention of April 1st and 2nd, 2017 would indeed mark a second transition towards such direction).

Let's now analyze the **methods** in detail.

Each one of the five round tables pooled some ten colleagues and was focused on a subject concerning our job:

– counseling techniques;
– the counselor's human characteristics and personal skills;
– values, ethics and deontological principles;
– good practices and comparison with European experiences, cultural and application prospects in the future of

counseling;

– the training process.

The round tables had one facilitator each, to guide the **sense-making** process within the team's opinions. Besides myself and Eliana Stefanoni to facilitate the whole process, supervising the tables, we had the contribution of Roberta Lorenzetti, Dianora Natoli and Giorgio Piccinino.

In order to avoid being too loud, the process was designed to engage the team members into two-to-three people discussions at a time, at most. Furthermore, and as already specified, a mixed technique was chosen: at each table a part of the participants (subgroup 1) worked on a conceptual mental map (Rico, 2000; Cosso, 2013), a more creative way that makes it possible to represent and link the people consciousness. A second part of them (subgroup 2) worked with an Internal/External Dialogue technique that is more rational and focused on stimulating critical thinking. Each and every member of the table came equipped with material to be shared and had access to more material to elaborate with co-workers.

On Friday afternoon we moved on to the contents' elaboration: each table was split into two groups and each group into pairs or three-member subgroups. On Saturday we started assembling the contents, with a view to the results' presentation to the Board of AssoCounseling, and the following day the Paper was presented to the partners meeting by the Board of AssoCounseling, with a representative from each table and the process supervisors.

A few weeks after the convention, many participants made themselves available to carry on the job they had started in Assago. AssoCounseling invited all partners with the requested experience (5 years of professional practice and research activity) to attend, and many accepted. The following appointment would be a year later, at the convention of April 2017 in Florence.

The round tables begin: Florence, April 2017

On Saturday, April 1st, the participants gathered at a really appropriate location: the historical scientific-literary Vieusseux Council inside Palazzo Strozzi, a cultural institution in Florence. Not all the participants had attended the works in Assago, hence the first goal was to realign different minds and points of view, languages and visions. The counselors worked in teams, using **visual templates** to visualize the concepts that were being elaborated. A table task was to take up the Assago Paper and evaluate the aspects to be integrated and elaborated, to create a map with the subjects and issues to be scrutinized. A second table analyzed the counselor/client relationship from various points of view: what each of the two elements of the relationship thinks, sees, says and feels. The third table focused on the analysis of the structure of the counseling process, with the purpose of highlighting those 'founding' aspects that are typical of such kind of relationship.

The works were not over that day, they went on during another day in Milan the following June.

Milan, June 13th, 2017

We followed up on the templates created during the convention in Florence, looking into the subjects in order to get to a broad definition, as much across-the-board as we could, regarding the different methodological approaches of what the counseling process is and how it works. Using **visualization techniques**, the groups came up with the metaphor **of the counseling process** as a river connecting the process itself to the environment, the client and the counselor, and scrutinized the competences and views necessary to sail on such river. A few founding aspects of the process were outlined:

– Source: the client's request.
– Environment: everything concerning the counselor's professionalism (training, supervision, etc.).
– Setting: the way the client's request is addressed (timing, goals, rules, etc.).
– Mouth: the results (greater awareness etc.).
We decided to focus the following event on such subjects.

Milan, November 23th, 2017

A few months later, again in Milan, we carried on focusing our activities on the subject of the counseling process and, in particular, on some aspects that had emerged as crucial to all the participants:

– the existential vision underlying the process;
– the process' structure (stages, setting, rules, etc.);
– the relationship's characteristics (goal, nature of the relationship, etc.).

We decided to focus especially on the subject of **timing** (duration of the process, number of meetings, etc.): a group concentrated on comparing their own experiences on the topic, while others worked on the basic, across-the-board tools for the different approaches and on the areas overlapping with other support careers. All groups, though, exchanged views taking into consideration the matrix of the process' structure created during the previous works, that is to say the three stages of exploration, follow-up and conclusions.

Through the observation of the round tables, a seed has become more and more tangible of a **group culture** revealing itself by means of shared behavioral codes when working, and of a language that has softened the semantic diversities to integrate visions and perceptions.

Milan, January 30th, 2018

At the January event the works focused on analyzing the three stages more in details: what happens during that stage, the goals, the tools and the necessary relational skills in every moment of the process. The participants were split into groups, using flip charts and post-its, trying to share knowledge, experiences and failures, considerations and experimentation.

The debate was often lively but what originated is a **group process of growth** that is slowly making room for exchange, debate and a shared language to integrate the need for some sense of belonging with each and everyone's personality. At the end of each day, satisfaction was evident regarding what had been done and the experience of building something collective, giving a part of oneself to create an US.

Identity is a dialogue: Milan, March 8th, 2018

Last but one stage of what is, now evidently and to many, also a group counseling process, where the counseling process is at the same time a means, and an subject to study. A select group of a dozen people met to lay the foundation of a document. They worked together, writing down – word after word, sentence after sentence – the **description of the counseling process and its stages** just like it had been generated by that extraordinary process of group identity co-building. The document that emerged is the tangible evidence of a process of awareness, growth and sharing at the round tables.

Editing went on off-line, with select meetings and a mail exchange where the draft was gradually refined and shared for integration and observations. The circularity of the feedback and initiatives, the evident priority achieved – among all participants – by the definition of an US towards the affirmation of individual personalities, guarantees that the editing process is truly the outcome of an exchange among professionals from a community of practice.

Conclusions

The process reaches an end when the paper is integrated with its introduction and the description of the stages and methods, to make it clear to everyone how we got to the very contents. One last meeting during the convention in April, 2018 will finally produce the presentation that the representatives from the Tables will make at the partners' meeting, regarding the last two years' works – before the final paper is ready to be released.

Learning to refrain from imposing ourselves
is a discipline that makes room
for exploring the Other's life,
and that makes it possible to the Other,
just like it does to us, to explore ours.

Richard Sennet

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[Part Two] The results: shared practices, distillation of knowledge

by AssoCounseling Practice Community

If the ants come to an agreement

they can move an elephant

African proverb

The attitude of the first group of practice and category – expert counselors and AssoCounseling members from different Italian cities – was to start from the assumption that a shared "vision" must be built together: co-building. Our getting together has then become a real commitment to **search for connections, contamination and agreement** for promoting counselors, their professional well-being and their good practices. Aware that our professional community needs, now more than ever, **listening, relationship and contact** – just like the people we deal with everyday as professionals – we focused on the pursuit of **co-building**. This is how we created a community of practice and category through which we made sense of the need for "being there" and of the principle of human potential development propelling it.

The process and its structure

The process

In order to define and explain the counseling "path" that we as professionals propose our clients and complete with them, the term **process** has been used – and not by chance – deriving from the Latin processus (from the verb procedĕre "proceed"): **development, execution, further progression, follow up, progress.**

We talk about "process" when we mean a sequence of events with a certain unity or that take place uniformly and regularly and, generally, an aspect of reality to express a flux, a development; for instance, a sequence of issues and symptoms of an organism, closely interconnected; or a series of psychic phenomena with a certain unity or uniformity or a certain order.

An operating system is a whole made of a finite list of actions to carry out as a sequence, and of the data elaborated by those same actions; from the systemic point of view, a process is every change within the system, that is to say a transformation which, starting from one or more *inputs* (a whole of interdependent activities with a specific target), feeds back one or more *outputs* with added value, and which includes a few rules and metrics in its final *check point*.

The "philosophy of the process" identifies, then, an ever-changing and dynamic reality, and we mean not only the overall system transformation taking place between the initial and the final stage, but also the temporal evolution of

the system and its variables along the process itself. In a counseling "process" the system is us the counselors and our client/s, actors and directors of such transformation at the same time.

So, then, the various counselors' work at the round tables has provided food for thoughts, along the stages, and identified, too, **an "existential vision" of the counselor** which underlies the counseling process, a vision where – referring especially to those authors who, like Carl Rogers, have most of all underlined the importance of a "focus on the person" practice – **the human being has the resources, the will and the capacity of choosing, self-defining and self-determine.**

Not just that: if we believe this, we also believe that **the client is the most self-competent person within the counseling process,** and we as counselors take him by the hand facilitating the expression of such competence.

The counseling process, in this vision, responds to a request for change and a search for meaning by the human being in progress and, in its experiential and relational nature, supports the expression of the resources and potentials of the person by placing the people and the environment that are intrinsically connected at the core of the relationship.

It is important that we, the counselors, maintain and give evidence of the application of the support relationship's ethics, and that the reference values of the process we propose and carry out with the client be: transparency, coherence, honesty, acceptance, authenticity, trust, freedom and respect.

Professional counseling has an ecological prospective of the human development and places human beings at the core of their own evolution in a sustainable way: it acts with**personal, organizational and social sustainability** generating value, change and improvement, in line with the changes inside the paradigms connected with the principles of *curing* and *caring* and with the need for consolidating those activities and professional actions able to bring a higher well-being to the individual and the community.

Counseling is then a chance to build and co-build through which people can control their decisions and actions better. The increased knowledge, capability, network support and the feeling of community cohesion are, hence, some of the principles underlying it.

The counseling relationship has some peculiarities that make it different from other support relationships (because of the structure, the goals, the competences and the relational qualities) and it is based on awareness – the counselor's first, and the client's.

In a genuine "maieutics" of the relationship the counselor "helps you to help yourself", he is the competent professional leading the other, the client, to find the resources within himself to face and overcome hardships, manage a crisis, find some clarity in a period of change, choose consciously.

What is different from other support relationships is the reciprocity and circularity of the relation and of the communication characterizing every specific counseling relationship: its limited contractual boundary, its focus on the present, the intervention time being short and targeted, its vision and use of resources for the future, its experiential

nature and concrete emphasis on the ordinary, its transparent and proactive role at creating networks and carrying out research.

The maieutics of the counselor, in a Socratic way, is not the art of *teaching* but that of *helping*, since truth cannot be taught – it is a "knowledge" we can pass on by evidence, by "contagion", by conveying and sharing.

The structure of the process

When scrutinizing our examination of the process, looking for possible collective actions applying to other support professions, the chance came up to identify **a specific structure of the counseling process which we compared to a river**:

– the **source** – the client's request – is the starting point, coming from a need for change with varying degrees of being explicit, made explicit and self-aware, along with opportunities/resources and triggering a process of consciousness and comprehension of the setting;
– the **riverbed** is the river's ecosystem, with its balance-guaranteeing features constantly renewed by the **tributaries** which provide, on the one side, everything that is related to the counselor's professionalism (self-analysis, specific professional background, supervision, ability to creatively use the techniques linked to his approach, building a professional network, etc.) and, on the other side, everything that is related to the setting (where the client's request is accepted in terms of organization and time management, direction or "compass" of change, shared rules, etc.);
– the **mouth**, then, is the result of the process in terms of greater self-consciousness compared to the initial request, meeting the target both regarding the subject and the achievement of change;

On such river, on a rowing **boat** (the relationship) the client and the counselor travel and work together, a paddle each, to hold the direction.

The **landscape** along the river is the environment, personal and social, where the "two-men navigation" happens.

The structure of the process, according to the experiences exchanged among the participants at the tables and the feedback they collected from their colleagues in years of practice, **includes a space and a time: three main stages** with specific time frames; a definition of setting with rules, goals, activities and relational and technical-procedural tools, both stage-specific and shared by the whole process.

The setting is an **internal and external space, it is the place where the interview is held**. It is a professional container, flexible by nature, with different levels of structure and clearly identifiable and adjustable according to the contingencies and circumstances imposed by the needs. Such relational space, connected to the process, can be placed in a free professional environment – either individual or inter-professional – but it can also be set inside an organization (an environment that could be businesslike, social, educational, communitylike, correctional, health care-related, etc.), either private or public.

The time is the total duration of the process, varying (as an average) **between 8 and 15 meetings** (provided that in some cases the process can last less, or even end after the first meeting), spread into three main stages: an initial stage we named exploration, a central one for consolidation and transformation and a final, closing one.

The average time per session varies according to the type of client and could last: 50/60 minutes (individual), about 90 minutes (couple/family), about 120 minutes (group).

For every stage, aware of the fact that we could not be exhaustive, we identified specific **goals**; **activities** the counselor carries on to meet the targets with the client; and a whole series of **relational and technical-procedural tools** we consider fundamental, regardless of the methods concerning each and every counselor's training. Some of these tools are stage-specific, others are shared by the whole process. The entire counseling activity is a mix of relational, inter-individual and network actions aiming at laying the ground to get concrete and testable results.

Finally, we identified some **relational and expertise qualities** the counselors implement along the different stages of the process which lead them to meet the goals, and we paid special attention to the **counselors' perception of themselves, the clients, the environment and the process**.

The three stages of the process

1) Exploration stage (between one and three meetings)

In the initial stage – from the moment the client contacts the counselor to the definition of the contract starting the actual process – the Counselor welcomes the client and lays the ground to build a relationship of trust and collaboration, providing the environment for working on the factors of self-consciousness, protection e promotion that facilitate the people along their dynamic process of evolution and change.

This stage may indeed end after the first meeting if the client is sufficiently aware of his needs and take them to the counselor, being able to identify a subject and a target in a very short time; it may, instead, require more time – no more than three meetings, though – if the client is poorly aware of his needs or is dealing with more than one topic, so the counselor needs to help him untwist and identify a working path. In either case, the counselor must use his skills to try get a global vision of the person, in his existential environment – often complex – meaning a multiplicity of levels.

When dividing the goals and activities we included common entries (*The counselor welcomes the client,* for example), to underline the fact that some counselor's activities are so "fundamental" they have to deal with that very stage target.

Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that every meeting (including the following stages) requires indeed a welcoming "initial stage" where the counselor makes the client feel at ease. Also, we can't forget that beyond the "exploration" of the initial stage of the process, focused on a preliminary mutual counselor/client acquaintanceship, there may be some initial "exploration" before every following meeting, to let the client bring up his experiences to the counselor, in the here ad now.

Goals

– The counselor shall welcome the client and lay the ground to build trust and collaboration for the improvement of life quality.

– On the basis of the client's request he will identify and agree upon a topic and target, in order to choose whether to work together and how.

– He will help the client figure out his own experiences and clarify their contents, stay focused and present, concentrating on his own here and now.

– He will evaluate the coherence between the request and the type of activity to be offered, so as to determine whether there are the conditions to define a contract.

The counselor's actions

– The counselor welcomes the client and makes him feel at ease; he introduces himself, describing the type of counseling activity – taking into account other support professionals as well, and gives details regarding his own methods.

– He listens to the client's request and life details with curiosity and interest.

– He listens to the needs – explicit or implicit – with empathy, without judging, and analyzes them, accepting the client's attitude and his uniqueness.

– He defines the setting rules: logistics, duration of the process, schedule, costs, payment methods; he gives the client the informed consent and personal data processing disclosure forms, underlying the importance of the duty of secrecy and the obligation of confidentiality.

– He helps the client figure out his own experiences and clarify their contents, evaluating the coherence between the request and the type of activity to be offered.

– He stays focused and present, concentrating on his client's here and now.

– He identifies and agrees with the client upon a topic and target in order to choose whether to work together and how, verifying his own capability to carry on the change process; if so, he shares and co-defines the contract/project; if not, he suggests the client to look for another professional and supports him doing so.

Relational and technical-procedural tools

The counselor's tools in this exploration stage are:

– active listening and identification with the client's narration – both verbal and physical;

– open and/or closed questions to gather data and contextualize the feedback information;

– highlighting key concepts and words;

– positive and constructive feedback, selection of the key elements to focus on;

– rephrasing the client's verbal contents through the consideration/paraphrase of his emotional and relational experiences;

– recap and synthesis to improve comprehension;

– informed consent form and privacy policy.

– when gathering data, the counselor can take notes as well as let the client do that

2) Consolidation and transformation stage (up to 6-9 meetings)

The consolidation is the central stage of the process, where building and carrying out the change, in agreement with the client, is based on communication and an emphatic relationship promoting planning and experimentation, choosing a project of evolution, the comprehension/action correlation, the use of resources, the energy management and enhancement, the potential's guidance.

The Counselor, using his skills and professional awareness, sets as the facilitator of processes and systems, in line with the client's reference framework.

There is no unique methodology to manage the complex client-process-transformation relation, but it is indeed possible to draw on different professional counseling models and, for each of them, the counselor can – based on his background and long-term experience – use different tools to meet the goals agreed upon in the contract: communicative/relational ones, strengths and room-for-improvement analysis, experimentation and implementation.

Goals

– The counselor shall strengthen the trust and collaboration relationship, fostering the client's self-analysis, self-exploration and self-learning.

– He will assist the client towards change, supporting his openness to change and the scouting, organization and deployment of his abilities and skills.

– He will help the client figure out his own experiences and clarify their contents, stay focused and present, concentrating on his own here and now.

– He shall deeply understand the client's experiences, helping him acknowledge, face and possibly overcome obstacles, beliefs, automatisms and limiting schemes concerning his potentials' development.

– He will foster greater responsibility in relation to independent choices for a better self-efficiency.

– He will encourage the client to develop empathetic and emotional competences, fostering spontaneity and transparency.

– He will motivate the client to become more and more self-conscious and aware of his environment, strengthening his ability to choose and his self-determination towards the goals agreed upon.

Counselor's actions

– The counselor refers to the contract/project agreed upon as the process' map and compass, in a permanent creative co-building and self-determination.

– He helps the client figure out his own experiences and clarify their contents, stay focused and present, concentrating on his own here and now.

– He identifies and fosters the client's skills and resources, underlying and developing his empathetic and emotional skills and areas to be improved.

– He uses specific techniques coherent with his own role model.

– He triggers the change and awareness process by fostering the experience of change.

– He keeps focused on the centrality of his relationship with the client, monitoring carefully the dynamics and possible critical issues of the relation, process or environment.

– He oversees the process evolution and evaluates its coherence and implementation in the client's routine.

Relational and technical-procedural tools

– Active listening and identification with the client's narration – both verbal and physical.

– Open, closed or reflexive questions to gather data and contextualize the feedback information;

– Highlighting key concepts and words;

– Positive and constructive feedback, selection of the key elements to focus on;

– Metaphors, visualizations, imagination.

– Rephrasing the client's verbal contents through the consideration/paraphrase of his emotional and relational experiences;

– Recap and synthesis to improve comprehension;

– Narrative, expressive, artistic and physical tools.

– Interdisciplinary, innovative and creative tools.

– Possible "homework".

– Goal-achievement evaluation tools.

3) Closing stage (1-3 meetings)

The duration of the process' closing or conclusive stage, just like the initial one, can vary according to the consciousness level the client has reached, the quality of the relationship built between the counselor and the client, the type of mutual feedback on the process, the change-reinforcement goal and the client's sustainable independence in relation to the initial request.

It is necessary, furthermore, to take into account that the "closing" is not just the third stage – the final one – of the process, it may regard any single meeting as part of the three stages and it requires a specific care when it's time to leave, with a personal specific pace and method.

Even the concept of mutual feedback and monitoring the job that has been done together should be extended to every stage and every meeting of the process, as a moment of analysis and "vision", not only of the contents but of the counselor/client relationship as a whole, too. In addition to that, let's keep in mind how important and necessary an adequate appreciation is of the possible results – minor and major – along the entire process, not only the final meetings.

It could also be necessary to manage possible "closings" out of the process due to interruptions – mutual or not – caused by, individually or mutually, the client and the counselor.

Goals

– The counselor shall make sure that the process lead to an improved well-being and life quality for the client.

– He shall appreciate, with the client, the improved ability to sort things out regarding personal experiences and clarify their contents in the here and now.

– He will share the results of the process in terms of meaning, exhaustiveness and effectiveness, evaluating the counselor/client relational dynamics.

– He will consciously help the client acknowledge and consolidate the skills activated during the process and his ability to organize and deploy them.

– He shall evaluate the possibility/need to continue the process or refer the client to another professional based on his assessment of the process' completeness or on new needs.

– He will assess the counseling process validity and appreciation, the relationship and the change achieved, including its consequences on the client's life environment.

Counselor's actions

– The counselor, based on the initial request and the contract, recaps the crucial steps of the process and the most significant experiences of change that have improved the well-being and life quality.

– He nurtures the skills and abilities deployed in the experiences of change.

– He assesses the client's improved ability to acknowledge, face and possibly overcome obstacles, beliefs, automatisms and limiting schemes concerning his potentials' development.

– He facilitates the client's co-responsibility to renegotiate the contract in terms of duration and contents, in case the client himself considers the process incomplete and needs to continue.

– He activates his own network of professionals and takes the client to a colleague, in case he detects the need for a different intervention.

Relational and technical-procedural tools

Beyond the communicative-relational tools previously indicated within the different stages of the process, there are specific ones, too, for this stage:

– results and learning evaluation;

– possible conclusive paper or questionnaire;

– possible new contract;

– end-of-process specific parting.

Relational skills and competences

We identified a list of across-the-board skills and competences the counselor makes available for the client: an ability to do (actions and tools) based on knowledge (know-how, education, experience) which entails an ability to be (and become) relational. In other words, the counselor is aware of his own specific role, his own **knowledge, ability to do, ability to be and become** and of his own personal and professional limits and, in terms of boundaries and agreement, he is able to make deep sense of what he does.

Finally, the expert counselor keeps himself constantly updated, strengthens his skills and knowledge and undergoes a regular **supervision**, with steady paths of **personal growth**; he activates and collaborates with professional and social **networks** (inter-/intra-).

In particular, **the counselor makes use of the following competences**:

– he welcomes the client and makes him feel at ease, listening without judging, with empathy and sympathy in a genuine and transparent way, truly accepting the client's attitude and uniqueness.

– he can adjust to the client's values and language – verbal and physical;

– he has a specific attitude towards emotional intelligence, able to feel and manage his emotions and help the client manage his own, assisting him to "stay" with what's here and now;

– he's attentive to the client's changes when he's feeling accepted and perceives the chance to speak freely and trust the other;

– his knowledge and experience regarding the communicative e relational techniques is deep, he consciously monitors the client's own verbal and non-verbal language, his somatic attitude towards his own experiences and contents, the empathetic effect and level of trust, the feedback to his proposals and encouragement to change;

– he understands the setting he's created for the client (posture, distances, proxemics, spaces, schedules etc.);

– he's focused and present, attentive and concentrated, personally and professionally;

– he keeps a conscious attitude and vision over different points of view: himself, the client, the context, the relational dynamics, the process;

– he expresses a genuine concern, interest and open-mindedness towards the client and his environment;

– he encourages the client to "stay" with what happens when emotions are unleashed, and supports his elaboration;

– he underlines the comprehension-actions connection, facilitates the explanation of motivations and the selection of the path to change, promotes the experimentation of improvement;

– he's ready to examine and monitor the coherence among the different stages of the process.

The counselor's view

The counselor can develop **the witness/supervisor vision into the setting**, through the observation of what happens inside his relationship with the client and understanding the consequences of words and possible power and relational dynamics connected with roles/positions/personalities, adapting his behavior to secure the coherence of the methodology-contract combination. In particular, he will keep a **mindful vision** over some specific dimensions:

– **himself** (self-evaluation): satisfaction/dissatisfaction, separation/nostalgia, suitability/unsuitability, sense of usefulness/futility, empathy level, discontinuity level, resonance level, gratitude, frustration, being essential, powerlessness, acknowledgment of one's own work;

– **the client** (hetero-evaluation): potential's growth, achieved level of motivation and well-being, problematic issues management, appraisal of deployed/non-deployed resources;

– **the relationship between himself and the client** (inter-evaluation): relational issues, independence encouragement, level of trust and empathy, power subjects/dynamics;

– **the environment**: limits/obstacles, opportunities/resources; interconnections and influence among the different systems; facilitation or frustration along the process, support or fatigue along the process, surprise and unpredictability; level of strength for any positive/negative setback in the system; level of extended learning for the evolution capability, sustainable by the system itself.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper is returning to all AssoCounseling associates the goals, methods and results of a job done with determination, perseverance and professionalism. A group of people who, at different times and with different methods, have contributed to complete a collective and complex task. As said before, we consider this work as founded on a "community of practices" to be carried forward in order to expand the professional community, the competences, the contents and process awareness as well as a different way to see the community life and facilitate and promote the contribution of all associates, for a greater professional self-determination based on shared founding aspects.

We believe that this paper, beyond its valuable contents, drives a clear message: **describing what a counselor is and does is a task for counselors first, that is to say those who experience the day-to-day beauty and benefits of such profession**. We have often been described by theories and differences, some of them in favor of counseling and

counselors, others rather adverse to this new professional identity; nevertheless, such opposite visions have often been expressed and debated (with valuable exceptions, obviously) among people who have never "provided" a counseling session nor have been any counselor's client.

The time is ripe and, to some extent, decisive, too. This, and all the requests coming from inside and outside, are asking us to stop delegating and start being responsible for clearly stating what role, purpose, values, identity we are going to express ourselves as counselors in Italy.

Credits

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