Second edition

PSYCHOLOGICAL COMMUNICATION

Theories, Roles and Skills for Counsellors

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Peter Trower • Roger Look

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Psychological Communication

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'… neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar position in which he stands.'

(William James, 1899)

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Preface

In writing this book we have two major aims. The first is to investigate the processes involved in counselling a person with a problem. A wide range of factors must be considered and a number of important questions addressed if we are to appreciate the fundamental nature of the helping relationship. We must ask ourselves the following: What are our goals in helping someone? How do our views on the way in which people function influence how we deal with them? How does the relationship between helper and client affect what is achieved? *Insight* into these crucial aspects is needed if we are to improve our own helping skills. Part I of this book deals with the theory behind the helping process and gives the reader a framework from which to work.

However, to *know* what is necessary for good helping is not enough. We should also be able to *do* and *say* the right things correctly in a practical setting. It is for this reason that Part II of this book describes in detail the *concrete skills* needed to help someone with a personal problem. Learning these skills is a necessary condition for effective counselling. Therefore, we use many practical examples throughout the text. Moreover, the reader is referred to a website that accompanies this book: *www.psychologicalcommunication.com* (see Appendix I).

This website contains examples of communication between helper and client that are meant to demonstrate the proper application of basic and advanced communication skills, combined with exercises and observational tasks for the student.

The principles expounded in this book have emerged from three decades of practice and research into effective counselling conducted in the Netherlands and the U.K. During this time workshops and training programmes in counselling communication skills have been developed for both professional helpers, such as psychologists and social workers, and for those whose work entails a degree of helping or advising others, including teachers, dentists, nurses, negotiators in industrial disputes, careers advisors, pastoral workers, and management trainees. For all these professions and other groups, the principles and skills presented in this book have been found to be relevant and

effective. We therefore feel that workers in all occupations with an interpersonal component will find the skills presented will help them to become more professional communicators.

Furthermore, we believe that the principles outlined are applicable in any situation where one person is helping another, so that anyone who has ever considered the question 'How can I help a fellow human being in distress' will find much of use in this book. As such, we have avoided overly esoteric material and have simply tried to unravel and systematize the things people do, more or less implicitly, when they attempt to help others with their problems.

The book explains in everyday language, with as little jargon as possible, the interpersonal skills necessary for the effective discussion and solution of problems. Unfortunately, one often finds in professional training programmes that these interpersonal skills, which are so 'ordinary', are neglected in favour of more impressive technical skills. While not wishing to denounce the importance of the latter we believe that help with personal problems is not an area reserved solely for professionals. Having greater education and experience does not automatically mean that one does a better job of helping.

This book is the result of intensive cooperation between authors from two different countries: the Netherlands and England. It is a revision of our Dutch book entitled *Psychologische Gespreksvoering* (Lang and Van der Molen, first published in 1984, 18d edition in 2020), which has proved to be useful to many kinds of helpers in the Netherlands and Belgium. To our sadness and regret Prof. dr. Gerrit Lang, the first author of *Psychologische Gespreksvoering*, has passed away in the summer of 2018. We are convinced that this edition of the book remains faithful to his spirit.

Henk van der Molen
Gerrit Lang †
Peter Trower
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April, 2020

Introduction

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1.1   Purpose and Structure

At various times in our lives, most of us find ourselves helping another person with some personal problem. This is an important and often difficult undertaking. There are no simple answers to the question of how best to help another person overcome difficulties. In some cases help may simply be impossible, and at other times, even when we believe that we know what is good for another person, we find that they pay no attention to our 'sensible' advice. As a result, it is sometimes easy to become pessimistic about the possibilities of helping people and to adopt a fatalistic view, that all endeavours to help are bound to fail. However, this book is based on the fundamental assumption that in many cases effective help is possible and that a lot can be learnt about this.

The *first aim* of this book (Part I) is to investigate the processes involved in counselling a person with a problem. To achieve this aim we will focus on certain aspects, such as the goals that the helper strives toward during a session: What do they want to achieve and why? What is their perspective on how people function? How can they best achieve their goals? Insight into these matters is the first precondition to making purposeful choices about one's own perspectives and consequent behaviours, and to change these when needed. Another consequence of this insight is that the helper learns to see what impact their own behaviour has on the person they want to help. However, *knowing* what you, the helper, want to achieve with people and *knowing* the ideal way to achieve this does not necessarily guarantee you will *do* so in practice.

For this reason, the *second aim* of this book (Part II) is to give a detailed description of the concrete skills needed to help a person, in concordance with our stated aims in Part I.

Professional counselling cannot be learned from reading books alone. We sincerely hope that our elaboration on good counselling behaviour and concrete skills is helpful for the practical exercise of psychological communication. The skills in psychology (SiP's) are exemplified on the website accompanying this book: www.psychologicalcommunication.com.

In Chapters 2 to 5, we examine the theory underlying our form of counselling, while in Part II (Chapters 6-8) we go on to describe the nature of effective helping skills, which are based on the theories chosen in Part I, and discuss how these are put into practice.

In Chapter 2 we present a basic philosophy for working with people on their personal problems. The frame of reference from which we approach clients and their problems is of obvious importance in influencing how we work with them in practice. Having discussed our basic premises we proceed, in the next two chapters, to consider theoretical viewpoints which we believe are important in guiding what we do and say during the helping process.

In Chapter 3 we discuss approaches based on 'client-centred' theory (Rogers, 1951; 1957). We expand on this Rogerian viewpoint to include principles drawn from the field of cognitive psychology, particularly the work of Wexler (1974), as an important complement to basic counselling theory.

Theories of social learning (for example Bandura, 1977; 1986; 1997) have been widely used in explanations of the development of personal problems and we shall investigate how such theories may be incorporated within overall counselling theory in Chapter 4.

Thus the book has a somewhat eclectic character as regards the choice of theories. In the previous century several theorists (Wachtel, 1977; Garfield, 1982) attempted to integrate the various different helping approaches by searching for common factors within them. In doing this some integrationists (such as Garfield, 1982) have sought commonalities in processes of helping (for example the building of the helping relationship), while others (for example Carkhuff 1969a, 1969b) have investigated similarities in the characteristics of the helpers themselves in an attempt to discover which qualities and skills are essential

for good helping. We hope to show that the theories we draw on are complementary and that their integration increases the flexibility and effectiveness of counselling.

In addition to the aforementioned theoretical background, a helper should have an overall structure in mind to guide them in the counselling process. The counsellor should normally have a goal in mind. In order to achieve the goal in a systematic way, they need a step-by-step approach that allows them to monitor their progress. The helper should also be able to modify their approach towards the client at various stages of the process in order to mirror the changing nature of the counselling relationship and tasks. To this end, we present four 'roles' of the helper and describe a model of counselling based on the work of Egan (1994) in chapter 5. In this model we distinguish various stages of counselling, describe the goals of each stage and the skills needed to achieve each goal. We then focus on the helper as a person and discuss the core qualities of the effective helper.

In Part II we describe the micro-skills involved in helping and the integration of these skills into an effective style at each stage of the counselling process. This is in line with the philosophy of our book: it is not enough to know what we want to achieve in counselling, we must also have the skills to bring it about in practice. Though the theory of counselling is not inherently difficult, it is the application of theory in practice that is often a stumbling block.

Chapter 6 describes the nature and function of the basic skills needed to conduct a counselling interview. In this the counsellor is principally a listener and guide who aims to clarify and bring order to the client's account.

Chapter 7 deals with more complex skills that build on those mentioned in Chapter 6 to promote clearer or even new insights into the client's problems and help to prepare the client in the search for solutions.

In Chapter 8 we discuss the process of working out solutions to problems and implementing them in real-life situations. Since there are many kinds of problems, all of which demand their own treatment and specialist knowledge, we will restrict ourselves to a number of general principles and directives for the

helper. The final question discussed in this chapter is how to end the counselling relationship.

1.2   For Which Helpers Is this Book Useful?

This book was originally written for professional helpers and counsellors in training. The basis for the book came from the experience gained through practicals in professional counselling that psychology students took at the University of Groningen (Lang & Van der Molen, 1992). Over the years, the book has also proven a useful aid for many other programmes and training courses on counselling, supervision, guidance, coaching, teaching, and service providers. It is also used by (prospective) educators, social workers, study advisers, student counsellors, nurses, doctors, dentists, police officers, theologians, employment officers and other advisers. All are 'helpers' in the broadest sense of the word. The combination of theoretical knowledge and practical skills in the book fits well with modern insights into learning competencies within the field of education.

Furthermore, a growing trend has emerged in many organizations where managers are encouraging self-direction in employees in solving problems. The theory, roles, and skills provided in this book hence form a sound basis for this coaching process. Moreover, this book is about people counselling other people. It provides useful insights and covers the skills needed by anyone who has ever wondered how they can help another person with a problem.

The reader will rarely come across the term 'therapy' or 'psychotherapy' in this book. In our opinion, these concepts should be reserved for specialist-professional help for severe and chronic mental distress or persistent personal problems.

1.3   Who Can the Counsellor Help with this Approach?

What type of client do we have in mind for the form of counselling advocated in this book? Without resorting to labels, we believe that this kind of counselling is of most use in helping people whose psychological state is such that they

can still be held responsible for their actions and are capable of looking at their problems in a more or less objective fashion. While the problems such people have may seem relatively minor to an outsider, to the person themselves they may seem totally insoluble and of major significance. The sense of calm and security that counselling offers helps the person to begin putting their difficulties into perspective and to work out solutions to them. Thus we are addressing our counselling efforts to people who can cope with their problems themselves but not *by* themselves.

In the initial stages of counselling, psychological accessibility may be quite limited as the agitation and confusion caused by the problem is very great. However, in talking to someone who remains calm and relaxed in the face of such distress, the client's agitation should abate fairly quickly and they should begin to discuss their problems more easily and with greater clarity. Where the person's anguish is such that the counselling approach is not effective in reducing their discomfort to bearable levels, the emphasis should lie on forms of crisis intervention to which we can only refer here (for example James & Gilliland, 2016).

As its title implies, this book is about *communication between a helper and a client*. In particular it is concerned with situations where one person turns to another (who may or may not be a professional helper) because they want to talk about things which are causing them distress. We therefore start with an assumption that the person in distress is at least willing to discuss their problems. This does not necessarily mean that such a discussion will progress smoothly, as a willingness to talk and the ability and courage to do so are quite different things. However, the person indicates that they trust the helper sufficiently to at least make an attempt to talk about their difficulties. How profound such a dialogue actually becomes will depend on the way in which trust develops during the ongoing counselling relationship.

While we restrict ourselves to discussing counselling for individuals in this book, it is our belief that elements of our basic programme are equally relevant to counselling with married couples, families, and groups. However, counselling in these situations may require more specialist skills than those provided in this book.

Finally, we would like to underline that although our emphasis in this book is on the counselling process and the need to encourage the client to tackle their problems themselves, this does not mean that we consider the solution to all problems to lie exclusively within the individual. Often it may be necessary to change the client's environment or the system within which they live. Nevertheless, we believe that in such cases the liberating effect of gaining insight into one's problems and learning skills to cope with them will enable the client to be more effective in seeking changes in their social situation.

I   Insights into Helping

The Helper's Basic Attitude

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2.1 Introduction

When a counsellor engages in the process of helping someone with their personal problems they are faced with a whole series of questions. What do they think ought to be achieved in the counselling enterprise? In what direction should solutions be sought? The answers to these questions depend largely on the specific problem, but we should also be aware that the personal principles and convictions of both the helper and the client will strongly colour such answers.

In order to be able to answer these questions, the helper must take a certain stand. This cannot be objectively determined, but is a personal choice that is influenced to a considerable degree by the helper's own ideas and beliefs as to how people should behave towards each other. We therefore believe that an investigation of the helper's basic attitude is a necessary starting point in understanding the process of counselling. We can illustrate some important points with the help of a dialogue from a fictional case. In doing this we can compare the reactions of friends and relatives with those of professional helpers in order to get a better idea of similarities and differences. We are going to choose the case of Michael, a university student, who is struggling with a problem and seeks help from a number of areas. Let us hear how Michael describes what is troubling him.

Example

Michael: I've been at the university for a couple of months now but I don't feel that I'm doing very well. It was alright at first, but I soon found that I was having difficulties concentrating on my work. I manage to get down to studying sometimes, but I find my attention wandering and I worry that I have chosen the wrong course. Perhaps

> I'm getting worked up over nothing – after all, it's still early days. I wonder how other people cope? Ah well, I'll stick with it, I'm sure most people must have problems to start with. On the other hand, if I'm not going to like it, perhaps it would be better to start looking for something else straight away. Oh dear! I'm in a real mess.

We can see that Michael is worrying about his studies. He needs to talk about it, but how?

2.2   Typical Attitudes of Friends and Relatives

With some hesitation and uncertainty Michael starts a conversation with a friend:

Michael: I've been worried about my studies just lately – I don't think I'm doing very well. I just can't seem to concentrate and I've already failed a couple of essays. Perhaps I should find out whether I could change to another subject. What do you think?

It is evident that Michael's words lack conviction, both the tone and content displaying his uncertainty. People often begin like this when they feel hesitant and are unsure whether they should bother somebody with their problems. Michael's friend reacts:

Friend: You shouldn't worry so much, I'm sure you're doing fine. The first year is always pretty boring and lots of people fail essays. I've been finding it difficult to get down to work myself but, after all, we have only just started. Anyway, don't let it get you down – there's a good film on tonight, do you fancy going to see it? We could go down for a drink afterwards.

Of course, this is only one way in which the friend might have reacted and the reader will be able to think of various alternatives. Nevertheless, this type of reaction is common and in this case several aspects of it might prove helpful to Michael: reassurance, encouragement, well-meant advice, and an offer to go out

socializing together. Perhaps an evening on the town will help Michael to start the next day afresh, at least mentally.

What does the friend's reaction teach us about people's implicit beliefs about the best way to help others? First, it is evident that the friend takes a firm hold of the situation: *'You shouldn't worry so much, I'm sure you're doing fine.'* In this way he takes a very clear and direct approach. He listens to Michael's problem and without much further deliberation offers his solution. He almost tries to force Michael out of his worries: *'There's a good film on tonight, do you fancy going to see it?'*

Analysing the interaction between Michael and his friend in a bit more depth, it is possible to distinguish the motivations of both parties. Michael wants to talk about his problem but does not want to be considered a worrier by his new friend. Hence the casual, rather vague way in which he puts over his concerns. He is uncertain how his friend will respond and thus he tentatively tries to 'sound him out'. His task in doing this is made more complicated by his own uncertainty as to the true nature of his problem.

Michael's friend, for his part, feels the need to distance himself from Michael's problem. He has also been aware of the possibility of failure, but has attempted to push such thoughts to the back of his mind. Although he publicly claims to be able to cope, his private conviction may not be so great. Perhaps he has no real solutions but feels under pressure to produce some anyway, as this is what Michael seemingly wants. Thus the friend may give the impression of treating the matter much more light-heartedly than he actually does.

The dialogue may now develop in various ways. Michael may feel supported to hear that his friend has had similar problems and press him to discuss how he coped in greater detail. He may also agree to the proposal of going down the pub for a few drinks. However, suppose that neither of these courses of action brings Michael any relief. Still struggling to find a solution to his problem, he decides to talk to his parents about it. During a weekend at home, after dinner he begins:

Michael: Well, I, uh, … There's been something worrying me recently … I feel that I haven't been doing very well in my studies and I've been thinking about changing courses.

Mother: But Michael, you were doing so well, weren't you?

Father: What do you mean 'change courses', you've only just started – I've never heard such rubbish!

Michael: But I just can't concentrate. I've been getting bad marks and perhaps it would be better to change to something else before it's too late.

Michael wants to say more but he feels that what he has already said has gone down badly with his parents who have not seemed very sympathetic. He thus becomes even more vague and uncertain of himself. His father, who is just about to leave, says:

Father: Well, you should think it over very carefully but I don't see the point of giving up so soon. The trouble was that everything was too easy for you at school. Now you have to work a bit harder you don't like it and want to give up straight away. No, you should keep at it for at least a year and then see. Everybody has setbacks, you know, you will have to learn to cope with disappointments like everybody else.

While this is only a brief summary of the conversation, the gist of it is clear. His parents have gained some understanding of how Michael feels. However, their reactions are influenced by a number of other factors. From the father's responses we get a clear impression of his fundamental beliefs: *'You should not change your mind once you've made a decision.' 'Once you have started something you should keep at it.' 'You should be able to cope with disappointment'*, etc. He tries in this way to appeal to Michael's sense of responsibility. *'You should think it over very carefully.'* In a firm manner he suggests that Michael should stop thinking in a negative way and should continue his studies at least until the end of the year.

How should we evaluate the type of help that Michael's father gives? If you believe that Michael should be encouraged to discuss his problem further within an atmosphere of trust and support, then you would probably feel that his father takes the wrong approach. He gives Michael little opportunity to express his doubts and uncertainties and he does not seem to be interested in his son's

This book combines relevant theoretical insights and concrete communication skills necessary for effective counselling and coaching. The authors first explore the helper's basic attitude. Secondly, they discuss views from client-centred, cognitive behavioural and social learning theories that are important for good helping.

Bridging theory and practice the authors describe the helper in four roles: confidant, communicative detective, teacher, and coach. The helper uses these roles within a three stage helping model: problem clarification, gaining new insights and treatment of the problem. This book describes the essential communications skills for each of these three stages. Many examples clarify the counsellor-client interaction which is discussed, throughout the book.

The extensive website accompanying this book (www.psychologicalcommunication.com), offers numerous exercises that are helpful to enhance the student's insight in the theories and to acquire the communication skills.
Adequate and inadequate use of these skills are demonstrated on video by different helpers, and the students have to evaluate their actions or have to apply the skills themselves. After that they receive expert feedback.

Psychological Communication has proved to be of great value for many communication skill training programs in scientific and higher vocational education. Professional helpers and others whose work entails counselling or coaching will find its insights and skills useful. It is also recommended for people with a general interest in psychology and communication.

The second edition is completely revised and updated. The website has been modernized with a new user-friendly lay out.

Henk van der Molen is professor of psychology at Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands. **Gerrit Lang** was emeritus professor of applied psychology at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. This book is based on their extensive teaching and practical experience in the field of communication skills training. **Peter Trower** is honorary professor of clinical psychology at University of Birmingham, United Kingdom. **Roger Look** was formerly consultant clinical psychologist with Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Care Trust. He is now in private practice in the West Midlands, UK.

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