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Methods and effects of integrative counseling and short-term psychotherapy for students



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Abstract

A comprehensive model of counseling that integrates practically relevant approaches is outlined briefly. It contains principles of the helping alliance, behavioral, cognitive, psychodynamic and existential aspects. Hermeneutics serves as a meta-theoretical framework. Data from a naturalistic single-group pre-post effectiveness study suggest that integrative counseling is effective in reducing psychopathology and distress as well as in restoring satisfaction with life and studies. Corresponding effect sizes were medium to high. The integrative model facilitates a coherent conceptualization of cases and first results show that it is useful and effective for a creative counseling practice.

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1. Introduction

Counseling is widespread and used in many different psychosocial fields to solve specific problems and reinforce professional and personal development. In a changing world, students have to face new challenges and develop new strategies to keep up with new demands. Many of those seek help and student counseling has become an important professional issue

throughout the world (Holm-Hadulla & Koutsoukou-Argyaki, 2015). There are many overlaps to short-term psychotherapy on the one hand and coaching on the other hand (Holm-Hadulla, 2004). Frameworks integrating various characteristics of the psychotherapeutic process (Lazarus, 1976; Ortlinsky, 2009; Prochaska & Norcross, 2007; van Deurzen, 2006) have been developed, but most approaches to counseling are eclectically blending different theoretic foundations (Goin, 2005) and a consistent integrative concept is still missing. To close this gap, a model was developed that integrates relational (A), behavioral (B), cognitive (C), psychodynamic (D), and existential (E) elements that are connected recursively. The ABCDE model integrates theoretical perspectives and practical strategies that are derived from client-centered, cognitive-behavioral,

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psychodynamic and existential psychotherapy (Holm-Hadulla, Hofmann, & Sperth, 2011). Meta-theoretical integration is one possibility to solve the problems that result from eclectically blending techniques from different theoretical approaches to psychotherapy and to integrate interdisciplinary research into a coherent framework (Feixas & Botella, 2004). Modern hermeneutics, the art of understanding (Gadamer, 1976, 1989), was chosen as a meta-theoretical frame because it outlines basic principles of helpful communication (Holm-Hadulla, 1996).

1.1. Alliance

Just like in psychotherapy, the interpersonal relationship between counselor and client is not only a necessary condition but also a mechanism of change (Wampold, 2007). Following the anthropology of modern hermeneutics, understanding and communication are not only means to reach certain goals but the basic condition of human existence (Gadamer, 1976, 1989). Historically, the relationship between counselor and client was focused on by client-centered approaches (Rogers, 1957). Genuineness, acceptance and empathy are expressed and take effect foremost in and through the relationship between counselor and client which is characterized by mutual respect and trust. Criticized because of a lack of structure and direction (Sharf, 2008), the major concepts of client-centered counseling are mostly regarded as a necessary but not sufficient requisite for change to happen. Thus, these elements need to be supplemented with other techniques and strategies while an attentive, respectful, and empathic relationship remains to be a basic and operative element of counseling. By now, there is also neurobiological evidence that attentiveness and empathy are indispensable for positive communication (Carhart-Harris & Friston, 2010; Marci, Ham, Moran, & Orr, 2007).

1.2. Behavior

In general, counseling that focuses on the modification of behavior is problem-oriented, short-term, collaborative and directive (Lovell, 2006). It is often delivered in the shape of pragmatic behavioral rules that specify functional alternatives to hitherto problematic behaviors. In essence, behavior rules are also a means to strengthen the self-efficacy of the client. Operant techniques based on positive and negative reinforcement are among others present in integrative counseling through the counselor's verbal and non-verbal approval, positive reinforcement and general acknowledgment. Frequently, clients are missing the necessary information about what contributes to the maintenance of the problem. When given that information and provided with functional alternatives in a positively reinforcing setting, clients are enabled to become more active, they learn to reinforce themselves and their self-efficacy is strengthened (Karoly & Kanfer, 1982). Social learning (Bandura, 1977) is also a mechanism of integrative counseling with the counselor acting as a role model at times, e.g. talking in a normal way about troubling thoughts. It can be acted out in role-plays or covert modeling can be used, where the counselor gives a detailed description of the

target behavior and has the client imagine it. In addition to new behavior that has explicitly been part of the counseling process, clients sometimes begin to develop new implicit attitudes, norms and values.

1.3. Cognitions

Cognitive approaches to psychotherapy focus on the systematic modification and correction of dysfunctional meanings, values and beliefs (Dryden, 2006). As in rational-emotive behavior therapy (Ellis, 1962), cognitive counseling focuses on the development of efficient, flexible and logical solutions that allow the client to reach his goals. Similar to cognitive therapy (Beck, 1976), the "c"-dimension of the integrative model of counseling stresses the importance of automatic thoughts which act as a kind of standard interpretation for events. Cognitively oriented counseling deals with the modification of schemata, information processing, and automatic thoughts (Mytton, 2006). Cognitive schemata serve as a filter and select what information one actually perceives, thus blocking out all seemingly unimportant information. Thus, cognitive interventions 'seek to reduce distress and enhance adaptive coping by changing maladaptive beliefs and providing new information-processing skills' (Hollon & Beck, 2004) to modify automatic thoughts. Socratic dialogue (e.g. Overholser, 1993) is a major cognitive technique to modify inflexible belief systems. Through a series of seemingly naïve questions about the client's (dysfunctional) belief system, the counselor leads the client to recognize its inconsistencies and the dysfunctional aspects. Then a more functional set of beliefs can be developed which is questioned again so that the client has to defend it; the realization that there are no inconsistencies anymore leads to the consolidation of the new belief system.

In addition, cognitive elements provide a rationale for behavioral interventions. Beddoes-Jones and Miller (2007) have shown on a qualitative basis that even short-term cognitive interventions can be helpful for the client to gain new and useful perspectives to behave.

1.4. (Psycho-) Dynamics

Neurobiological research confirms that a major part of human behavior is determined through unconscious information processing and decision-making (Damasio, 1999; Kandel, 1999). Today Freud's (1955) intuition that internalized experiences of the past have a strong influence on how new situations are shaped and interpreted is evidence based. Thus, in integrative counseling the client should be enabled to get in touch with unconscious conflicts and learn to recognize them rationally. The relationship between client and counselor can serve as a sounding board in which the client can remember her/his personal history, re-enact and work through (Freud, 1953-74) relevant conflicts. The psychodynamic part of the ABCDE-model of counseling offers the possibility to deal with memories, feelings and phantasies in a narrative way. If successful, pathogenic experiences that have not been sufficiently represented in the client's inner world can now be consciously restructured into coherent mental representations (Fonagy & Target,

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