Information giving or problem discussion? Formulations in the initial phase of web-based chat counseling sessions

Wyke Stommel

Center for Language Studies, Radboud University Nijmegen, Erasmusplein 1, Postbus 9103, 6500 HD Nijmegen, Netherlands

Abstract

In the course of counseling sessions, counselors use summaries/restatements (also called formulations) of clients' words. Online counseling literature advises counselors to use formulations more frequently than in spoken counseling. This article is based on a comparative research project on Dutch telephone and chat counseling. It appeared that the counselors used formulations in the early phase of the chat sessions, while they rarely did on the telephone. This article focuses on the formulations used in the initial phase of chat sessions to explore how they are embedded in the interaction and what they achieve. The data consist of 49 web-based chat sessions about alcohol and/or drugs; in 14 sessions the counselors used a formulation in the initial phase of the session. Two types of formulations were found, proposing two alternative activities as the current focus of the interaction: requesting and giving information (7 out of 14) or problem discussion (7 out of 14). While the first type solves equivocal help questions, the second explores if the client would like to disclose more about the problem implied in the question. The findings may be used to reflect on, and scrutinize the general recommendation to use formulations in online counseling.
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1. Introduction

Research has found that formulations (Heritage and Watson, 1979) are not only used in spoken counseling interaction, but also in web-based chat counseling (Stommel and Van der Houwen, 2013; Danby et al., 2009) and in e-mail counseling (e.g., Lamerichs and Stommel, 2016). However, the observation that they occur in counseling through various communication media, does not mean they are used equally in each medium. It has been suggested that compared to telephone counseling, in chat counseling they operate differently because they are sequentially ambiguous, not clearly making relevant either agreement or elaboration as a response (Danby et al., 2009). In this article, I focus on another apparent difference between formulations in chat and telephone counseling. In a research project comparing Dutch telephone and chat counseling (see also Stommel and Te Molder, 2015; Stommel and Te Molder, 2016), it appeared that the counselors used formulations in the early phase of the chat sessions much more frequently than they did in the equivalent phase on the telephone. Examining them is thus a way to explore whether and how online counseling differs from spoken counseling. The question is what these formulations accomplish and what this tells us about the fingerprint of online chat counseling (Drew, 2003). At the same time, the analysis serves as a basis to reflect on the professional conviction that counselors should use summaries in chat counseling more than in spoken counseling.

E-mail address: w.stommel@let.ru.nl.

2. Online counseling

Psychological evidence for the efficacy of online counseling is abundant (Kraus et al., 2010). The effect of online counseling on client's mental health has been found to be comparable to the outcomes of face-to-face counseling (Rochlen et al., 2004). Even compared to telephone counseling conversations, chat counseling appears to be of high quality and to have comparably positive effects (Cook and Doyle, 2002; Fukkink and Hermanns, 2009a,b; King et al., 2006a,b). Chat counseling seems most helpful when it resembles offline (face-to-face, telephone) counseling (Barak and Bloch, 2006). First, chat conversations that reveal and unwind personally significant information (like offline counseling sessions generally do) are perceived as more helpful. Second, smoother, flowing, online chat conversations in which misunderstandings resulting from invisibility and the lack of full synchronicity are minimal, contribute to feelings of helpfulness.

However, it is also widely recognized that counseling *online* differs from offline equivalents. The population may differ: those who seek online rather than telephone or face-to-face counseling may be uncomfortable with traditional social situations and be particularly attracted to the disinhibition inherent to online counseling (Cook and Doyle, 2002). Studies of the online version of the Australian Kids help line found that clients appreciated the lack of personal contact with the counselor online, while this was rather a concern for counselors (Bambling et al., 2008; King et al., 2006a,b). They thought the lowered emotional intensity possibly lead to the underestimation of the severity of clients' problems and that the risk of misunderstanding was greater online.

The conviction that counselors should receive training for conducting online therapy, even those that are generally comfortable with computers and communicating via text, seems dominant (Mallen et al., 2005; Rochlen et al., 2004). This idea is claimed to be related to the fact that the quality of written communication needs to compensate for the lack of physical presence (Kraus et al., 2010; Schalken et al., 2010). It is considered to be an important skill in online counseling to summarize what the client has typed (also called "paraphrasing", "restating", "checking perceptions" etc.) (Kraus et al., 2010; Mallen et al., 2005; Schalken et al., 2010). Summarizing would be a strategy "to elicit more information or clear up any possible misinterpretations" (Kraus et al., 2010: 176). Apart from solving or preventing misunderstandings, summaries are thought to help to structure the conversation and stick to the key issues. It is recommended to use summaries "more frequently than you're used to" (Schalken et al., 2010: 187) and to do so in your own words. For long summaries it is recommended to "chunk" (Baron, 2008) them and use various posts.

Studies that investigate the details of unfolding online counseling sessions have recently begun to increase (Ekberg et al., 2013; Harris et al., 2012; Stommel, 2012; Stommel and Van der Houwen, 2013, 2014). Ekberg et al. (2013) have examined counselors' responses to clients' problem narratives, which they found to vary in their affective valence. The counselor treated the client's problem as mere information or rather as trouble/bad news, partly depending on exactly how the client presented it. This implies that in online interaction, like in spoken interaction, whether some information becomes to be discussed as a problem is an interactive accomplishment in which recipients play a crucial part.

From the same interactional perspective, online and telephone counseling can also be compared. In the same research project this article is based on, we found that pre-closing questions occur much more frequently in chat counseling than in telephone counseling (Stommel and Te Molder, 2015). It appeared that clients do not always overtly acknowledge advice in chat sessions. Pre-closing questions (e.g., "Can you work with this?", "Have I answered your questions like this?") are a way to manage the dilemma of how to terminate the session when the client has not explicitly acknowledged the advice. Because they are used much more frequently in online counseling than on the phone, I analyze how formulations are embedded in the initial phase of online counseling sessions and what counselors achieve by using them.

3. Formulations in counseling interaction

Formulations have been defined as statements that "characterize states of affairs already described or negotiated (in whole or in part) in the preceding talk" (Heritage and Watson, 1979: 126). By using a formulation speakers explicate how they have interpreted one or more utterances from their interlocutor (Heritage, 1984), but they also serve to pick up on, or ignore aspects of the previous turns. Sequentially, they project a preference for agreement from the interlocutor (Heritage and Watson, 1979: 143).

Formulations vary widely with regard to their interactional functions and sequential embeddedness in the conversation (Sliedrecht, 2013). Their use has been described as follows:

> "[..] the institutional agent's formulation picks out something in the other's words, and while putting it forward as a mere neutral summary or implication, uses the opportunity to edit it in ways that will help the speaker's own institutional interest." (Antaki et al., 2008)

For instance, in therapeutic sessions, therapists use them to attenuate emotional accounts to help the client deal with their problems (Antaki et al., 2005b).