

Integrated counselling: Is this good enough across cultures?

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Abstract

In this workshop, a sample of evolving integrated counselling approaches will be presented followed by a discussion on hypothetical case scenarios where the said framework may be applied. There will be opportunities for the participants to incorporate their own counselling practice framework while learning from others during the discussion. It is practical and beneficial that this workshop be given 60 to 90 minutes length to maximise participation and more in depth discussion.

Participants in this workshop are encouraged to form an e-mail list for an “Advise and Consultation Forum for International Student Advisers/Counsellors”. The aim of this forum is to promote amongst International Student Advisers and Counsellors the sharing of strategies that are practical and effective in supporting or helping International Students.

The workshop has five parts, namely:

1. Pre-Discussion: Where are we (facilitators and participants) coming from and in what roles do we take part in helping or servicing International Students? If the participants have been counselling or advising international students, how long have they been in this position? Which one most important learning or aim would they like to achieve in this workshop? From a scale of one to ten, one being poor and ten being excellent, how would the participants rate their current confidence in advising/counselling International Students in a complex situation (i.e. more than two areas of concerns such as 1.) being administrative or academic in nature and 2.) being personal or emotional/social issues)?
2. Discussion: The focus will be to clarify some terminologies like “integrated counselling”, and “counselling framework”. In this section, the facilitators will reveal their own current counselling practice and the participants will be invited to add their ideas and comments. Participants will be invited to comment, criticise or suggest improvements.
3. Case Study: Fictitious, hypothetical issues from simple to complex situations will be read and clarified. The participants will be asked to form in groups and further discuss the cases whilst applying the sample framework suggested. A set of guideline questions that will assist in the application of the framework will be provided.
4. Feedback: The groups will share the highlights of their discussion. The participants will be challenged to assess if the practice framework applied is good enough. The participants will also be encouraged to self assess their current practice, reflect on what may be missing and how they envisage the missing elements or gaps may be filled in time.
5. Recommendations: The group will consolidate their learning experience from the session. Participants will be asked to raise any questions or clarifications they want known, discussed or followed up.

Key concepts: “integrated counselling” and “counselling framework”

In this workshop, “integrated counselling” refers to the awareness and application of typical features of the various counselling approaches that are practical and efficient in the counselling and advising process for international students. The various counselling approaches selected for the purpose of this workshop are: “Crisis Oriented Intervention”, “Psychodynamic Counselling”, “Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy”, “Process-Oriented Therapy”, “Narrative Therapy” and “Solution Focused Therapy”. The said approaches make up the theoretical paradigm that the author is inclined to develop. The practical application of the “typical features” of the said approaches will be one of the core challenges in this workshop. The selected “typical features” are outlined herein:

1. “Crisis-Oriented Intervention” prioritises urgent cases particularly “matter of life events” causing the breakdown or the ability of the person to function normally. It is common for this approach to use practical steps and expert skills in dealing with a problem or situation.
2. “Psychodynamic Counselling” is known for traditionally taking into account the relevance of past histories including childhood in analysing a case. This approach is practical in terms of linking the past and the present goal of the student being helped. In some cases, to explore the possible critical incident in the past (including childhood) may help the student choose to release themselves of any previous trauma and consequently undertake a more forward and positive outlook.
3. “Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy” also known as “CBT” proposes to take up “functional beliefs” (that are positive and constructive) and abandon “dysfunctional beliefs (that are negative and destructive). In many cases, this approach is easily comprehensible to students who are open to alter their views as they see the change that offers a promising difference.
4. “Process-Oriented Therapy” clarifies cross-cultural meanings of an individual’s perceptions and values. Like “CBT”, this therapy reinforces positive thoughts in a conflicting situation.
5. “Narrative Therapy” invites the individual’s expression of their own story. Like “Process-Oriented Therapy, this approach strongly appreciates people’s unique qualities, cultural identity, use of symbols and interpretation. Moreover, this therapy separates the problem from the person, highlighting that the person is not the problem instead the problem has its own life and causing the person the pain, suffering or discomfort.
6. “Solution Focused Therapy” also known as SFT qualifies for being a “time-effective” psychotherapy focusing on people’s preferred goals and course of action. This approach is characterised by the “use of exceptions”, “miracle questions” and “scaling techniques”. The “use of exception” is a technique whereby the person is asked to identify exceptional times when the problem seems manageable, recall the circumstances that may have contributed to the difference and suggest to do more of the same that seems to have worked to manage the problem better. “Miracle questions” on the other hand uses the “if” expression in a positive light, for example: “if a miracle is to happen, how would your day be like, or how would your problem come to a conclusion?” Again this is a technique to encourage positive thinking similarly applied in “scaling techniques” whereby a person is asked to rate (from 0 to 10, 0 being unsatisfactory and 10 being excellent) their current situation and further challenge them if they want to improve anything to state which rate (given the said scaling) they want to achieve and what will they do to get there.

Common for all the said approaches is the basic premise of encouraging the person’s awareness and utilisation of their own capabilities, resources and competence in dealing with

their issues. The approaches may however differ in various ways including their “questioning techniques” and “themes” of action” or ways of helping the person repair their suffering or reconstruct their strategies and life skills. “Integrated counselling” in this case is seen as the sensitive and skilful application of one or a combination of any or all of the said approaches when confronted in a counselling or advising encounter during the first meeting and the consequent meetings as may be necessary.

Awareness of the said concepts embedded in counselling may be an advantage when advising or counselling international students. This theoretical paradigm involving the said counselling approaches is an essential component of the “Counselling Framework” that is suggested in this paper.

In counselling international students, the author proposes a “counselling framework” that includes 1. an awareness of the various counselling approaches such as mentioned in the above paradigm, 2. awareness of one’s own professional orientation and training, 3. grounding of one’s own counselling skills, 4. awareness of one’s own cultural biases and values, 5. awareness of one’s own life experiences and 6. initiative to seek supervision and professional feedback that will assist one’s own counselling skills and confidence.

Vital to this “counselling framework” is an openness to the complex cultural backgrounds from which international students come. “Counselling framework” therefore is a dynamic and ever changing discovery of life’s framework (that of the counsellor and that of the counselee) which includes mental or academic life, the physical, psychological, emotional and socio-cultural beings. The author of this paper suggests that “integrated counselling” needs to constantly incorporate assisting students balance their life at university and this requires an assessment of the aspects of life as reflected in the “counselling framework” indicated.

It is the author’s experience that being proactive in creating venues where students feel comfortable such as support groups and social interaction activities encourage students to come to one on one counselling. For this reason, being proactive is engraved in the counselling framework that the author advocates.

Examples of Hypothetical Presenting Scenarios

1. A student lost her wallet.
2. A student wants to cancel one of his subjects but not sure what to do.
3. A student fell pregnant and her “morning sickness” is complicated by other health issues.
4. A student has problems communicating with his group mates and not sure how to contribute in a group project.
5. A student is not feeling safe and often worried that someone might assault her on her way to school or home.
6. A student has problems in concentrating in class, his mind wanders hence he absorbs nil of the lectures and tutorials.
7. A student experiences panic attacks and he seems to get worse when under pressure like examination time or when his home work is due.
8. A student has “stage fright” and hates speaking in public. Oral presentation is a requirement to pass the unit.
9. A student felt terribly overwhelmed in the first two weeks of the semester. He felt homesick, isolated in the tutorials because he seems to be the only international student in class. He indicated having difficulty understanding academics and complains that their accent is not only thick, their instructions are also hard to follow.
10. A student asks help for late withdrawal of subject without academic penalty. He was late one working day but the Faculty seems adamant that the student must suffer the

consequences because he did not listen to the Course Coordinators' advice of enrolling for a maximum of 3 subjects only until he proves to be well adjusted back to his studies. The student took a summer semester leave of absence because of family obligations, his father being critically ill and his family requested that he must go home and be around in the event that his father passes away.

Discussion: Guide Questions

- How would you help in each case?
- Do you have any special style of helping?
- Are you a directive or non-directive type of adviser/counsellor?
- How would you utilise the “integrated counselling and framework” that is suggested in this paper?
- What counselling model/s would you apply in each case and why?
- What are the cultural values, beliefs, skills and professional training you hold and life experiences you own that permeate your counselling practice?
- How would you utilise the support services in the university community to help the students in each case?
- What may be missing in your framework and how do you envisage the missing elements or gaps may be filled in time?
- What are your questions, thoughts, doubts, and suggestions that may be beneficial to the helping and counselling process?
- Would you consider the “integrated counselling and framework” being discussed in this workshop good enough for international students across cultures? Why or why not?

References and Suggested Readings

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