

THE CODE OF ETHICS IN COUNSELLING

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Abstract

The code of ethics represents an ethical practice guide for all the counsellors regardless of their level of training, the clients or the status in a professional association. The main coordinates of the ethical code are: informing regarding the services offered in the field of counselling; signalling the educational, training and employment offers; using occupational standards and profiles; identifying the education, training and employment mobility possibilities; offering activities that lead to developing skills in the following fields: self-knowledge, interpersonal communication and relation, information and learning management; career planning, entrepreneurship and lifestyle management.

Key words: counsellor, counselled/ client, ethics code

Introduction

Ethical issues are of major importance in the counselling relation and there are some common standards in this regard. The main point in counselling is the person's integrity and his or her freedom to choose and make decisions, the counsellor must not have a superior attitude, he must be sure that there is a balance between stimulation and reflection, the challenge to reflection must be combined with respecting his own interests.

Generally, in order to build and practice some ethical landmarks, the most useful model is the American one, the reference documents being the Code of Ethics and the Standards of Practice. The Institute for Education Sciences has elaborated a document that does not have a mandatory status, yet it guides the practitioner by indicating the fields and standards needed to conduct high-quality work.

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The structure of the ethical code refers to: the relationship with the counselled persons, professional training and development, the counsellors' evaluation, the counselling activity's evaluation, relationships with third parties, the quality of services provided to beneficiaries. (Institute for Education Sciences, 2004)

A. Counsellor - counselled relationship

The counsellor - counselled relationship relies on the following principles: specifying the counsellor's position; confidentiality; equality of chances; informing the client; personal relationship with the client; special counselling needs; testing the client; evaluating and interpreting the client's results; solving ethical problems; ending the counselling relationship; financial aspects of the counselling. Also, the counsellor:

- has the responsibility to know, understand, respect and apply the provisions of the ethical code;
- to practice his activity at a high quality level;
- to promote self-development and self-accountability in his relationship with the counselled;
- to provide a safe environment for the client with the purpose of having an optimal counselling activity;
- to communicate to the counselled the limitations and benefits of the counselling process.

Also, the counsellor - counselled relationship presents a series of traits. The fundamental traits are the following (Sanders, 2002):

- I am really heard: the feeling that another person is genuinely interested in me and tries to understand me, to listen to me;
- warmth: I feel welcomed by someone, as if they were truly glad to see me;
- confidentiality: it is very important to feel safe and certain about the confidentiality of one's confessions, so as not to feel embarrassed;
- equality: I like to feel that I am on equal terms with another person, therefore the counsellor will not behave as if he/ she were superior to me, like some "expert" or some person with power over me;

- non-judgmental attitude: I do not like to feel judged or be forced to do something, I do not like to be made to feel like I have done something wrong, I would like to feel accepted as a person and thus feel safe;
- only for people with problems: counselling is for people with problems, I do not have problems, so I do not need a counsellor;
- without limits: if I go to the counsellor, I will be able to talk about everything that is important to me;
- crying: it is ok to cry when you are upset, counselling helps you to express emotions and feelings;
- relationship: counselling is a relation of help and support, it is something about what happens among people, every relationship has unique aspects, the counselling relationship relies on communication and knowledge of everyday life; the client provides his own life experiences;
- respect for client, trust and cooperation: the counsellor has to learn to refer adequately to the cultural and attitudinal differences that may influence the relationship with the client and respect them;
- responsibility to achieve fixed purposes: “to be prepared” - expectations are important factors in building the relationship between the client and the counsellor;
- self-revealing: the client, “an expert at his own life”, is helped by the counsellor, an “expert in counselling strategies” to discover; the important aspect is the counsellor’s human dimension.

B. The professional training of the counsellor

This refers to 2 main aspects: initial and continuous professional training. The initial professional training covers: the level of studies, specializations, and competencies. The continuous professional training may include: specialization stages, active participation to seminars, conferences, programs, experience exchanges, scholarships and documentation stages; the counsellor has the task to keep up with the times, adopt a professional attitude, know foreign languages, use the computer and be able to create websites. The counsellor’s initial and

continuous training has to be accredited in order to be allowed to work with adults and requires covering certain special training programs, thorough studies or a master in this field.

Nowadays, there is a gap between the counsellors' initial training provided by universities and the demands of the jobs in this domain. For these gaps to disappear, the career counsellor should, first and foremost, have or develop certain abilities, skills. Competences designate the ensemble of knowledge, skills and attitudes that the counsellor needs to successfully fulfil his activity. The counsellor should have an adequate level of knowledge and understanding of the theories and principles of career counselling and development and should be able to use the specific tools of the field, namely: inventories of interests, value scales, aptitudes tests, career development questionnaires, career evaluation modules. The counsellor-trainer: counsellors certified as trainers in the field of counselling may conduct training, practice, evaluation and supervision of other counsellors. I will present in the Table 1 a general scheme of the abilities that a counsellor needs in building a relationship with his client (Dafinou & Vargha, 2005).

Table 1. *The abilities of the counsellor* (Dafinou & Vargha, 2005)

Moment/ counselling sequence	Counsellor's abilities	Counsellor's mistakes
Introduction - the first few minutes of the interview in which you meet with the client and initiate the conversation and the helping relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - present himself; - find out the name of his client; - indicate the purposes and objectives of the interview; - make the client feel comfortable by having a friendly interaction; - propose an open way of talking. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the absence of any of the aforementioned abilities;
Waiting - the nonverbal and verbal behaviour that will arouse the interest and attention of the client	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - breaks of 2-5 seconds between the client's intervention and the start of the counsellor's reply; - the break follows after an intervention of the counsellor, giving the client the possibility to have enough time to come up with an answer; - the counsellor uses a variety of verbal processes that encourage, but don't require the client to continue talking and doesn't involve the approval or judging/ evaluation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the counsellor interrupts the relationship with the client; - there is no break between the client's and counsellor's interventions; - breaks that are longer than 5 seconds create anxieties and discomfort; - the counsellor doesn't encourage the client to talk; - the verbal and nonverbal

Moment/ counselling sequence	Counsellor's abilities	Counsellor's mistakes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - of what has been said; - the counsellor must use a variety of nonverbal processes; - the counsellor must maintain an adequate visual contact; - the counsellor must have a clear, understandable voice. 	<p>procedure used by the counsellor in an inadequate way to interrupt the client's intervention.</p>
<p>Questions - a survey whose purpose is to obtain and clarify information.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - most of the exploratory questions are open; - one question at the time; - the questions are clear and brief; - the questions contain words that are not in the client's vocabulary; - closed questions are spread among the open ones to gather specific information; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - two questions at the same time; - the question is a disguised affirmation; - 3 consecutive closed questions are asked. - the question is unclear.
<p>Verbal tracking - a counsellor's answer to a client's intervention that is directly linked to what was just said.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - answer with quoting the content or a reflection of the feelings; - to openly/clearly state the sudden change of the subject; - to correlate the old material with the new one when a new subject comes up in the conversation or to ask the client to continue the discussion using open encouragements; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the counsellor introduces a new conversation topic without openly stating this thing or without correlation with the previous content; - the counsellor changes the subject from the main theme to a secondary one;
<p>Searching for the concreteness - the attempt to gather detailed information, specific aspects about that person.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - look for detailed information by using the questions: how, what, where, how often; - brings the abstract, philosophical discussion to concrete dimensions, more relevant to the person 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - allowing the client to talk about a relevant subject in an impersonal manner; - relevant details are not followed. - allows the client to talk vaguely and abstractedly.
<p>The non-evaluative reasoning - an answer of the counsellor, without any evaluative component.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - answer to the verbalizations of the client by questions or statements meant to explore the meaning of the behaviour or of the events; - to use confrontation to indicate the gaps between the feelings or perceptions of the client and the ones of the counsellor. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the counsellor states a negative moral judgment or criticizes the client's verbalizations; - the counsellor can threaten, prevent, minimize; - the counsellor directly advises the client what to do or offers a solution,

Moment/ counselling sequence	Counsellor's abilities	Counsellor's mistakes
		with an extensive exploration of the problem.
Reflecting the feelings - the counsellor's ability to be sensitive and to translate into words the subjective experience of the client	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - reflect the feelings that the client hasn't identified yet; - reflect accurately the intensity of the feelings; - identify the environment's stimuli that determine the feelings; - reflect the implied feelings that transpire from the client's statements; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the counsellor ignores the feelings; - wrongly tags/names/identifies the feelings; - wrongly tags/names/identifies the intensity of the feelings; - engages in solving the problem without identifying the feelings.
Involvement - as long as the counsellor or the client talks	- the client talks most of the time	- the counsellor talks most of the time

C. Evaluation of the counsellors' activity - a professional requirement

The evaluation of the activity is an action that leads to a judgment of the value of something or someone; evaluation is mistaken for measuring, although the 2 notions are closed and temporally out of phase. Measuring is an action of determining the value of a measurable dimension; it is objective, quantitative and relatively precise, and evaluation is general, relatively subjective, qualitative, approximate. When we say evaluation of the counsellor's activity, we target: the types of professional evaluative behaviour, evaluation tools, evaluation results, monitoring, feedback etc. The evaluation of the counsellor's activity can be done by: the counsellor himself, peers, an expert, coordinators. The evaluation refers to evaluating work sheets and surveys that contain 2 types of indicators: quantitative - answer the *how much/how often* type of questions; qualitative - answer the *how useful/how good* type of questions. The results of the evaluation are kept in the personal portfolio of the counsellor and in the internal database of the institution, to be checked, resent and exploited in periodical activity reports or to maintain the continuous training activity. Monitoring implies that the activity of the counsellor will be monitored regularly with the purpose of improving one's own activity.

The evaluation grid contains the following aspects (Table 2): name, date of the observation, observant, evaluation criteria, evaluation indicators and observations (Szilagyi, 2007).

Table 2. *The evaluation grid of the counsellors' activity*

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation indicators	Notes
The measure in which the counsellor chooses the correct approach strategy according to the established counselling need	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the existence of clear counselling need, to which the client admits; - explains the counselling process to the client, coherently presenting the order and logic of the steps that follow; 	
The measure in which the counsellor knows the exercises with which he works	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - integrates the exercise in the context of the process; - knows to explain the concept behind the exercise; - offers clear instructions for doing the exercise; - fairly and coherently interprets the results obtained during an evaluation exercise; - fairly and coherently answers to the client's questions related to the results of the exercise; - knows how to guide the client to find supplementary information about the subject at hand; 	
Technical aspects associated with the counsellor role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - keeps the confidentiality of the meetings; - clarifies roles and expectations during the first meeting; - sanctions the client's missed sessions; - formulates open questions; - summarizes/paraphrases, clarifying what the client said; - listens, does not interrupt the client; - refrains from giving advice to the client or imposing decisions; - compliments the client for emphasizing positive aspects; - he is clear/concise and to the topic; - accepts without judging/criticizing the client's point of view; - the client trusts the counsellor; - establishes a positive and constructive relationship with the client; - acts and guides the client towards developing certain abilities that can be used by the client in future similar situations; - nurtures in the client the feeling that he is responsible and able to take a right decision; - ends the counselling relationship at the right time; - gives support for the career plan development; 	

D. The evaluation of the counselling activity

Evaluation is a topical issue in the field of the educational system: evaluating the agents, the actions, the systems; however, the activities from the counselling field are rarely evaluated. Noticeable is also the fact that the two concepts - measurement and evaluation - are often misplaced in everyday language. We could consider evaluation as an action that leads to a judgment on the value of someone or something and measuring as a “scientific evaluation”. It remains to try to answer the following questions: *Why we evaluate?*, *How to evaluate?*, *Who and what we evaluate?*

The answer to the question *Why we evaluate?* allows us to specify the three functions of the evaluation: the scientific function, the pedagogical function and the social function. The scientific function means that the evaluation participates is part of the scientific validation process, namely in administering a scientific proof that can confirm or disapprove a theory. The pedagogical function refers to the fact that the evaluation must favour the regulation of the learning process, verify the adequate character of the knowledge, control the strategies and methods, enable the fixing of flaws. The social function is aimed at guiding and certifying the youth.

The answer to the question *How to evaluate?* allows us to give the operational definition of an evaluation. This definition is presented as a 6 stage process: precise selection of the reality to be evaluated; the operational description of the information on which the judgments are based; description of the objective in relation to the evaluation; identifying the stakeholders; identifying the elaborated judgment; fixing the use of judgments and the effects produced.

The answer to the question *Who and what we evaluate?* comprises the distinction between: the evaluation of the observing practices (interviews, psychometrical measurements, individual counselling) and collective intervention practices (education methods for guidance). The criteria that should be respected by the evaluation are: the objectives of the intervention methods should be diversified; the observation methods should be standardized.

Evaluating in the field of counselling is a necessary practice that does not represent only a way to control, but also a source of enrichment of knowledge and progress. The criteria that should be respected by the evaluation are: the objectives of the intervention methods should be diversified; the observation methods should be standardized.

E. The quality of the professional counselling services offered to the beneficiaries

The quality of the professional counselling services offered to the beneficiaries depends on a series of factors, namely: the counsellor's collaborations, significant persons for the client, persons and institutions as information sources for the client.

The counsellor's collaboration with other professionals from the same field or other fields, or institutions will be initiated when the relationship with the client is flawed.

The situations that require such collaborations include: slight personality disorders, serious psychological disorders, alcohol or drug abuse, health problems, speaking disorders.

The request to collaborate with third parties or the transfer to other counsellors must contain: specification of the problem that is the purpose of the request, the strategies already used with the client, the individual career plan and other relevant information.

Also, the counsellor will develop professional relationships with the local community, the client's family and relatives, in order to share with them the problems of the counselled; he will establish collaboration relationships with all the education and training suppliers.

The information sources for the client can be: public authorities, private nongovernmental organizations, school managers, school body, parents, and students.

Conclusions

The ethical code comprises the ethical principles that establish and maintain standards regarding the collaboration, integrity and professionalism in the counselling/consultancy activity, as well as the professionals' responsibilities. Also, it establishes self- and inter-evaluation landmarks regarding the counsellors' responsibilities towards clients, the clients' parents and colleagues, other specialists, school, community and towards themselves and the counsellor's profession. At the same time, they inform the persons and institutions that benefit from the counselling/consulting services on the counselling practices and the appropriate professional behaviour.

In Romania, we cannot talk about a well-defined ethical code, at a legal level, the counsellor profession *borrowing* a series of ethical rules from psychologists, pedagogues and sociologists. We expect that in the near future such a professional code will be finalized, which will constitute an indication of the fact that the profession of counsellor profession has overcome its moment of transition and gained a well-defined space in the Romanian professional landscape.

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