

Practitioner Perspective

Therapy in the 21st Century. A pimped profession?

By Sheila J Peelo



Introduction

In this article, the author reflects on how short-term counselling has changed in the 21st century. The article focuses on the widespread provision of brief counselling in society and looks at how the market place has changed both the practice of counselling and the persona of the counsellor as a result. It suggests that brief therapy has been repackaged

as a specific intervention and tradeable commodity. Originating in the author's personal experience of dealing with independent counselling providers, the article goes on to question the new form of counselling which is available to the population and whether this represents change for the better. It concludes that the persona of the counsellor has largely been transformed into a 'method

delivery person' and pimped out to industry to deliver a 'commodity'. Finally, the author urges the profession not to collude with the undermining of counselling in this way.

There is no doubt that the practice of counselling and psychotherapy has undergone change over the years. Indeed, it would be improbable for the profession not to continue to develop, transform and alter over time and in response to society generally. However, not all change is good nor indeed growth promoting. When change shifts our viewing lens it also obscures other things from awareness and at times away from what is valuable. Recently, I have begun to wonder whether counselling has become just an 'intervention', driven from its philosophical roots as an interpersonal experience. If so, how have practitioners likewise been altered by this progress, if at all? In reflecting on this here, I use counselling as a generic term for therapy, counselling, psychology and psychotherapy and confine my ideas to the provision of short-term counselling.

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Some time ago I inquired about doing private therapy work with brief counselling providers. During an extensive search, I discovered a thriving counselling market, much of it available via the workplace or through independent providers. A huge section of the population can access brief counselling cost free. While it seems that counselling is thriving, I pondered the changes I noticed since I first trained. The abundance of large-scale counselling providers has reshaped counselling as an intervention and a practice whose governance is uncertain. The counselling relationship appears to be a tripartite one guided less by core values than by what sells and promises an outcome.

The Counselling Package

Very recently, I contacted such a provider to inquire about freelance work. I was responded to rapidly. The application process was detailed, demanding quality standards of practice and seemed quite impressive. I knew of the organisation's calibre and reputation and felt happy about registering as a possible provider. What took me by surprise, however, was the rate of pay which was below the normal trading rate for counselling generally. When I regretfully turned down their offer because I thought it not adequate nor reasonable, the response I received was even more puzzling. I was clearly and pointedly informed that the provider had very strict governance criteria and their rate of pay was fixed. My training, experience and qualifications were similar to the clinical manager I dealt with and yet this did not appear to be of value, in fact it seemed to be invisible. It made me question what was valuable to the provider. I wondered too if obscuring experience might allow

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this provider to poach that very experience surreptitiously.

What's experience got to do with it?

What did this response convey to me with more than 20 years' experience in the public and private sectors as a psychologist, counsellor, psychotherapist and teacher? From one perspective, it might suggest that experience is irrelevant, the novice and veteran are to be equally rewarded. It might convey that the veteran adds no value, brings nothing extra. In business, industry and public service however, experience is routinely rewarded in terms of pay. Indeed, rewarding people adequately is a question of justice, something enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and a powerful workplace motivator. Then again it could be argued that a 50-minute counselling session is what the provider costs and then sells to industry. The person of the practitioner is only important in as much as they can meet baseline criteria to deliver that product. More than baseline experience is not necessary to do the job. The fixed rate reflects the necessary and (and apparently) sufficient requirements for brief counselling interventions.

When that is broken down a little though there seems to be a built-in contradiction to that way of selling counselling. On the one hand, providers of counselling construe human beings as

constantly learning, developing, improving and excelling but at the same time, the reward offered the counsellor reflects a person who is static and one dimensional. Now that is a difficult position to defend, because to reward people financially at a fixed baseline rate only, is to disregard their ordinary tendency towards development. The very purpose of a counselling intervention is to help people to change and grow. I suggest that this contradiction, is very likely to have an influence on the overall impact of the work. It could indeed become a block to thinking within the counselling environment, and ultimately adversely affect the aim of client change.

The 50-minute intervention

Yet another viewpoint suggests that the counselling provider organisations furnish private practitioners with a regular and reliable income without the responsibilities of being an employee. There are certain advantages to working externally to organisations: greater anonymity for the client, greater distance from the influence of organisation culture, greater ability to resist competing demands (Torun 2015). The freelancer is arguably better insulated from the destructive influence of the organisation's culture (Shea and Bond 1997), something which could affect the delivery of the commodity. The 50-minute intervention could also be said to have greater appeal to management, thereby making

it an attractive service. However, the '50-minute intervention' is also the product of commercialism and an ideology of outsourcing, rather than a natural evolution of counselling practice. The stripping back of therapeutic care to something which is commercially attractive, value for money, accessible and effective has also shifted it away from its roots in counselling.

Outsourcing may well benefit many enterprises and services in several ways, not least in financial savings. Eliminating waste and improving efficiency may well be the rationale but are also trendy. Despite its benefits, outsourcing is a form of 'splitting', and something which has its own consequences for the organisation's consciousness and development. What was originally outsourced was a function + a person, however what is often bought back is a function. The counselling 'commodity' i.e. the 50-minute session, cannot so easily be divorced from the person of the 'deliverer'. The ethical principles upon which counselling is based are human values; being trustworthy, promoting wellbeing, avoiding harm, and respecting the client's right to be self-governing. These values are at the core of all counselling practice, regardless of worldview or style, and help to create a climate where something can change for the client **for the better**. This means that the 50-minute session relies essentially on a particular kind of relationship, a counselling one. The practitioner is not contingent to the commodity, but an essential interdependent part of the process. From my experience with some of these providers, what is at issue is a specific kind of 50-minute session and that is what is bought. It is

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essentially prescriptive. Though this is not entirely unusual in some forms of therapy, in my view it is problematic because practice can become a counsellor centred activity.

The commodity

Recently I have begun to reflect on this 'commodity' and how it has influenced the way counselling is practiced and taught in the 21st century.

As I see it, the 'commodity' is what is often traded, backed by research, showing it effective and helpful (McLeod 2010, Collins et al 2012). With the commercial emphasis on the commodity and its benefits, the relational aspect of counselling, and what I consider its central therapeutic value, is side-lined. The interpersonal experience has become contingent to the delivery of the commodity. The person of the counsellor is altered in such a business contract to an 'adequately skilled delivery person'. In such a scenario, accredited counsellors are 'pimped out' to industry, often for a reduced fee which can ignore experience and training. When the fee is then fixed for business reasons, then the whole basis of therapeutic practice is undermined.

Repackaged counselling

I argue that counselling has become an attractive and lucrative commodity, which easily trades on current ideas about mental health and wellbeing,

improved productivity and prompt intervention and prevention. When dismantled from a public health system or from corporate services and then managed by the enterprising private sector, counselling has been repackaged. It has become a valuable means of generating much needed cash for hard strapped public health sector providers. Strategically, such counselling tends towards a results-centric and management focused activity which, I believe, can compromise client agency. When the client only learns the solutions prescriptively, the method becomes the central focus of counselling and agency can be undermined (Peelo 2016). If the profession is not promoting client agency but rather the illusion of agency, then counselling itself has lost its way.

There are many influences on a results-centric counselling approach, not least of which are ideologies of 'evidence-based practice' and 'outsourcing'. Safeguarding, risk assessment, responding to actual threats as well as positive approaches to psychology have also influenced the way counselling is taught, practiced and regulated. Doing and producing are valued because they fit with the brief intervention model of counselling and, I argue, can misunderstand 'being with' or 'containing' the client in emotional distress.

Creating victims

Of course, brief approaches also move us all away from the

pain of experiencing the world. If the counsellor is 'pimped out' to the client, then valuing has already been violated and this will be felt at a system level. The counselling environment may then be changed and become a tension ground for control of the space and agenda. Subtle imposing or direct advice giving will become the method rather than human relationship skills. Replacing being with doing may relieve clients of the frustration of powerlessness but it also reinforces the idea that we are victims of our own misfortunes, something Walklate, (2006) refers to as the 'responsibilisation' narrative. It allows us the illusion that we can control adversities which may well rob us of our 'agency' as human beings. Agentic people are not just problem solvers but, crucially, they actively reflect, self-reflect and can change their whole meaning making when necessary. Therefore, counselling needs to respond to clients from that position if it is to create a meaningful climate of change for the client.

'Doing', though, as part of a counselling relationship and client choice, is growth promoting and evidence of agency. Joseph (2013) tells us that when people feel valued, they are more likely to be open and honest in the counselling room, grounding change in values. Such change, not imposed because of another agenda, is change that supports the emotional and psychological wellbeing of the client and is agentic. It is the value placed in the human interaction, the life-enhancing counselling relationship and the respect for autonomy which builds client personal growth. It is the integration of conditions which cultivate change with a focus on outcomes that

Where mindfulness is offered as a way of living and working, it provides an opportunity to reflect on values and what it is that brings meaning to one's life

enable change 'for the better'. The primacy of the counselling relationship is about empowering the client with a sense of self-government within a social context, and that does not exclude action or doing. What is emphasised however is client agency rather than counsellor method.

Time-limited counselling is a very valuable social resource. It can be used flexibly as a gatekeeping activity, to help clients move forward, seek further help and find support. It has some reliable scientific support as useful and helpful. Therefore, it has the potential to be a transforming experience rather than a method which is blind to human agency. It is therefore important that the profession itself, educators, regulators, and decision makers do not contribute to the pimping of the counsellor in any way by being silent on the commercial changes taking place that affect the status of counselling professionals. If we close our eyes to the pimping of counselling, then we ourselves run the risk of undermining it in the long term. ☺

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