Learning to Identify as a Counselor in the Helping Fields

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I have considered working in the helping fields for years. Defining the role of a professional helper has given me insight into the position I would play within the area.

> Thus, with what appears to be a simple social introduction, begins a process of helping. A process that, while appearing so natural and so easy, is in truth, complex and filled with challenges for both the helper and the client. Helping another person cope with a problem or facilitating that person's movement toward a specific outcome is a very responsible process. It is a process involving at least two people. While various names and labels can be applied to the person providing the help (e.g., psychologist, counselor, advocate, social worker, etc.), we will refer to this person simply as the helper and the person receiving the help as the client. (Parsons, 2001 p.3)

Reading the excerpt above provided an understanding of how a professional helper differs from the definition of a helper you find at a construction site or a mother's helper. Looking at the term helper, I define it as someone who assists a primary person. They are not the primary person responsible. Learning the term helper is applied to various names and labels for those in fields such as psychology, counseling, and social work establishes a foundation of the depth and responsibility a professional helper undertakes in the helping fields.

Further research on defining a professional helper provided a broader, more detailed view. "The process of helping another, the direction it takes, and the outcomes will all be influenced by the person of the helper. It is not just the helper's technical knowledge or skill that influences and gives shape to the helping process, it is also his or her values, beliefs, and operating ethics" (Parsons, 2001 p.3). For me, this statement begins to outline the importance of the professional helper. Our values, beliefs, and operating ethics developed throughout our lives. Influenced through our cultures, family, experiences, and what we hold are cornerstones to creating the individual who will sit across from a client and navigate their life and situations. The American Counseling Association Code of Ethics provides a stringent code for

professionals in ethics. It is essential that a professional helper thoroughly read what has been established and compare how their operating ethics correlates with ACA's code.

Breaking down the definition of a professional helper further, I believe an effective helper understands and appreciates that helping is not simply the sterile application of techniques or procedures. “While a helper's understanding of what to do may be grounded in theory and research, the "when" and "how" to do it require a sensitivity that extends well beyond theoretical knowledge and technical efficiency” (Parsons, 2001 p. 4). The professional helper is tasked with applying techniques or procedures and the ability to read, understand and relate to the client. Trust is crucial as the helper builds a relationship with the client. The earlier a helper gains their client's trust, the client's willingness to share increases. Gaining their trust allows for the practical application of the when and how.

Neukrug shares that "although there are client factors that are clearly important to positive outcomes, the counselor's ability to work with the client is equally critical" (Neukrug, 2016, p. 17). He continues to share "that it has also become clear that specific counselor qualities, sometimes called common factors, seem to be at least as important as matching a treatment approach to a presenting problem" (Neukrug, 2016, p. 17). My role as a professional helper is crucial for a client's success. Upon a first meeting, a new relationship is about to form. Thinking about the kind of person I choose to trust with the deepest parts of myself and my life gives me the perspective of my responsibility as a helper.

In many cases, the helper takes the role of the person or people who failed the client the most in life-developing situations. They are becoming the client's support, providing guidance and direction. A client is coming to a helper seeking help navigating their life, so their future looks different.

I feel led to become a professional counselor because of how much professional counseling has helped me. I desire to give back to others the freedom and love I have found for myself and within my own life because I have counseled extensively. My commitment to myself,

God, and healing led me to the phenomenal counselors who guided me. If it were not for the counselors God has led me to, I would not have found the life God desired for me to live and have. I want to give that gift back to others. "But what makes counseling effective? First and foremost, factors such as readiness for change, psychological resources, and social supports may affect how well a client does in counseling" (Lambert & Barley, 2001; Neukrug, 2016 p. 17)

My desire to join the helping fields stems from my childhood. Early in my parent's divorce, the court- mandated counseling. My experience was horrible and ineffective. The counselor discussed everything with my mother, and I was reprimanded for what I shared. I never wanted that to happen to another child again.

Many other instances through the course of my life have nudged me to pursue becoming a counselor. Being employed by the New York State Unified Court System affords me the inside opportunity to pursue a position within the system to make a difference in the lives of families, teens, and children. God opened the door for me when I sought my divorce. A young lady from church sought me out to walk through her healing with her regarding an abusive childhood. I have had family, friends, and coworkers who regularly seek me out for counsel. As far back as high school, I remember classmates sharing about family problems, fears, and insecurities. I have always wanted to give back to those around me what I desperately longed for growing up, a person that heard, understood and validated me and my emotions.

Neukrug shares what he believes are characteristics of the effective helper.

> One common factor, the ability to build a working alliance (Norcross, 2011), has been alluded to by almost every counselor and therapist from Freud to the modern-day, new age counselor. Based on the research (and perhaps some of my own biases), this working alliance may be composed of the following six components: empathy, acceptance, genuineness, embracing a wellness perspective, cultural competence, and something that I call the “it” factor (Neurkrug, 2016 p. 18).

As I consider the factors above and apply them to my life, I realize how my experiences have molded me to become the person I am. Through my interactions with others, I can see that I embody the characteristics described in the above passage.

Reflecting upon my counseling sessions throughout the years, I have observed a few essential things a counselor does during a session.

> I believe that one of the most important things a counselor does during a counseling session is to be present for the client. In my years in practice, I find building a rapport with the client and being able to stay present during intense moments are of utmost importance. In order to make progress, a foundation must be built where the client feels safe and supported (Swintom, 2018 para 1).

Being present was key when I sat in the chair as a client. When the counselor was not present, I felt myself retreat like a child. It was more harmful to me and hindered the effectiveness of the session. When the counselor was not present, I was reminded of my childhood and how neither parent was present. Being present requires listening, and I did not feel they were listening.

> Listening helps to build trust, convinces the client you understand him or her, encourages the client to reflect on what he or she has just said, ensures that you are on track with your understanding of the client, and is an effective way of collecting information from a client without the potentially negative side effects of using questions (Neukrug, 2006, 2016, p.150).

Ensuring the client, you have been listening is the second most important piece in a session. Being heard is shown through both verbal and non-verbal expressions. As a client, it helped me feel safe. A counselor reinforces this concept when a question is asked of the client regarding something shared. The counselor can also ask for clarification on the information the client provides. My current counselor will ask, did I hear you correctly? I would consider using reinforcing words as a tool to help the client know they are being heard. Nonverbal cues, such

as a head nod or brief eye contact, can reflect empathy during a session and reinforce I am listening. During my childhood, I learned to pay close attention to nonverbal clues to avoid potentially getting in trouble or reprimanded. Many of the foundational skills are intertwined to create an impactful session.

Finally, a counselor creating a safe atmosphere in a session is important. "Functional Analytic Psychotherapy (FAP), is a relational approach based on contextual behavioral science that emphasizes the creation of a safe, attuned, evocative, and mutually authentic relationship" (Holman et al., 2017; Kohlenberg et al., 1991; Tsai et al., 2009/2013/ 2016 para. 5). It is important as a counselor I show up as my true authentic self for my client.

> Genuineness refers to the counselor's ability to be authentic, open, and in touch with his or her feelings and thoughts within the context and parameters of the helping relationship. Thus, one may not have all aspects of his or her life "together," but within the counseling relationship, the counselor is real and seen by the client as being in a state of congruence(feelings, thoughts, and behaviors are in sync). (Neukrug, 2016, p, 20)

In my experiences with counseling, there have been a few counselors that were disingenuous. Feeling a counselor is disingenuous should not happen in a counseling session. As stated above, as a child, I had a counselor share everything I said with my mother. For the longest time, I perceived counseling as hurtful and ineffective. This session early in my life caused a long delay before I would ever trust a counselor again to provide effective, genuine help.

The counselors I connected with in my sessions were the helpers I perceived most understood me. I want to take any opportunity to receive feedback from the client to help create the safety required in a session. I know the damage that happens when the safety component in a session is missing.

One of Neukrug's working alliance components is acceptance. In a counseling session, there should never be a lack of acceptance. "Behavior therapists suggest that issues cannot be

discussed and goals cannot be developed if clients do not feel accepted by the counselor or by themselves." (Neukrug, 2016 p. 19) A lack of acceptance could cause further damage to the mental health of the client. They may establish, from this interaction, a negative mindset towards the helping professions, similar to my experience. I developed a negative attitude when someone counseled me in my life and marriage because I felt a lack of acceptance.

Further consideration of my prior counseling sessions, I became aware that countertransference should not happen in a counseling session. "The unconscious transferring of thoughts, feelings, and attitudes onto the client by the therapist" (Neukrug, 2011, p. 50, 2016, p. 20). Some counselors will use it as part of the client's session, but if it is severe enough, it could cause a problem in the counselor-client relationship. It could demonstrate that the counselor needs to be embracing a wellness perspective. If this happens frequently, it could be a sign of "counselor stress, burnout, compassion fatigue, vicarious traumatization, and unfinished psychological issues can all hinder the counselor's ability to have a working alliance" (Lawson, 2007; Norcross, 2010; Puig et al., 2012; Neukrug 2016 p 20). Counselors that reminded me of people from past relationships, I did not want to cultivate a working alliance. I perceived they would not understand me like those in my prior relationships did not understand. "Therapy should be about you as the client, and if your therapist's feelings are getting in the way of that, this can cause harm to the process. On the other hand, useful countertransference in therapy can help you grow" (Moore, 2021 para. 6)

A counselor should not disclose personal information to the client during counseling sessions. The session is about the client, although the counselor may be willing to provide examples from their own lives. Strict adherence to the client’s privacy is imperative, and they should never share information with other clients. Counselors must follow ACA's ethical code, which provides a section on confidentiality and privacy.

As a helper in the counseling field, every detail matters for success. I have often heard the saying dress for the job you want. The environment a session is conducted plays a vital role

in the overall success of a session. I want to help people; I do not want to make a client uncomfortable. Neukrug suggests "[h]ow one dresses and the language one uses with clients are two additional components of the office environment" (Neukrug, 2016 p, 147). I would dress in business casual attire. I do not wear loud colors, prints, or patterns. I want a client to feel comfortable in my office, but I also want to feel comfortable. I am responsible for creating the environment.

Daily I like to keep myself well-groomed, but never to the point, the client feels inferior. My clothes must speak to the persona they are about to converse. My personality is calm; therefore, I do not wear loud, bold prints but choose small patterns with clear lines. Also, I am a warm and inviting person; this is reflected in the colors I choose for my wardrobe. I feel most comfortable in black, brown, and navy colors. These colors reflect my conservative side. I prefer pants, but if I wear a dress, I prefer longer dresses or leggings worn underneath. Nothing is low cut, too tight, or short. The jewelry I adorn must be chosen carefully. Every choice made must speak to your character without using words.

I have always displayed unique attributes and personal qualities that set me apart from others. These attributes will help me become an effective therapist. Since childhood, people have said I have a warm, welcoming personality. During my young teen years, my father commented that I have a great sense of perception and discernment of situations and people. In most cases, I make people feel welcomed, accepted, and not judged. I have noticed people are drawn to me. Friends seek me out for advice, as a shoulder to cry on and help within their lives. My discernment to see, feel and know certain things from the Holy Spirit, allows me an advantage that helps those communicating with me to feel seen and heard on a deeper level. Finally, my most precious attribute is my sense of humor and ability to make those around me laugh. This attribute tends to bring a sense of connection with others.

In assessing the requirements a competent counselor exhibits, I see within myself some personal barriers. One of the barriers in my role as a helping professional would be my need to

grow in speaking and listening with empathy instead of responding using self-reflection. Reflecting upon my counseling sessions, I recognize that my counselors have helped teach rather than fix me. I must learn to avoid trying to rescue or improve the person's problems for them. I need to allow them to search internally for the revelations and answers for their own lives. I also need to spend time learning the person and learning to attune my listening skills. Once my listening skills are more focused, I will succeed in seeing all sides of the situation, and being present, which will afford a more productive counseling session.

As a helping professional, I am a role model in the community. You are always a reflection of the profession and should uphold the standards The American Counseling Association provides. I do not believe a counselor should become intertwined with friends' affairs. They risk the threshold of crossing the boundary from friendly advice to professional counseling. In any free volunteer group, for example, a church small group, they may be faced with shouldering the responsibility as a leader and the line becoming blurred again. There is the possibility of encountering a client at a function or party. If your character displayed in the office differs from the character they see outside the office, it may hinder the counselor-client relationship. The negatives outweigh the positives if you only sometimes uphold the profession's standards, even when not on the clock.

Becoming a professional helper is not a role anyone should take lightly. The information provided within this paper is just a glimpse of how one person fits into the position. I struggle with the rigid standards that make the profession so lucrative and does it fit with my persona. I ask myself the challenging question: is the helping profession my ultimate goal?

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