

# Unit 4, Assignment 3

## Understanding Power Issues Within Counselling

### 3 Understand power issues within the counselling process

#### 3.1 Explain the role differences between counsellor and client

#### 3.2 Explain the inherent power differences and perceptions of power, based on these role differences

*Students should complete an essay explaining the role differences between counsellor and client, as well as the inherent power differences and perceptions of power based on these role differences.*

*Word count: 600 minimum.*

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It could be argued that within all human relationships there is a power dynamic that is worthy of sociological and psychological study. This difference of power is of especial significance within a professional service which operates to support vulnerable people and this can be evidenced by efforts to protect vulnerable people within legal and ethical frameworks.

Understanding the role differences between counsellor and client also necessitates an understanding of the different schools of thought within counselling, such as person-centred therapy and psychotherapy. Traditionally, within psychotherapy, the role of the psychotherapist is to be the 'expert' in the counselling relationship who guides the sessions for the client. Contrastingly, the roles between the counsellor and the client are more equalised within the context of person-centred counselling which aims to empower the client to guide the sessions themselves. Regardless of the kind of counselling that the client is receiving, there are professional expectations in place which seek to protect both the counsellor and the client during the process.

Being aware of the inherent power differences (referred to as 'power differential') between the counsellor and the client is an integral part of learning, training, qualifying and practicing counselling or psychotherapy. In the piece *Ethics in Psychotherapy and Counseling: A Practical Guide*, Pope and Vasquez observe that "a power differential is inherent in psychotherapy" (Pope & Vasquez, 2007). It is a given fact within the ethics of practice. Power differential is the recognition of the counsellor's power in relation to the vulnerability of the client - who is assumed to be seeking support relating to issues of mental health and emotional wellbeing. This is predominant difference is developed upon in the text *Ethics in Psychology: Professional Standards and Cases*: "The client is always to be considered vulnerable to harm relative to the therapist, and the psychologist is obligated not to use the power position inherent in the therapists' role to the client's detriment." (Koocher & Keith-Spiegel, 1998, p. 91).

Zur Ofer (Ph.D), in his text *Power in Psychotherapy and Counselling*, highlights four main viewpoints regarding power differential. The first group, which is the minority, are critical of counselling and psychotherapy in general, and perceive all forms of counselling to be inherently harmful to the client. The second group, which forms the majority, agree that there is an inherent imbalance of power within counselling and psychotherapy and recognise its

potential harm if power is misused. The third group of scholars - formed by feminist, humanist and existentialist views - recognise the power differential as an inherent part of counselling but equally recognise the importance in challenging this imbalance so that "more mutually respectful relationships can be developed" (Ofer, No Date). This could be achieved by working towards a more egalitarian society outside of the context of counselling as well as inside, which would further the authenticity of a more balanced dynamic. The fourth view was suggested by Lazarus in 1994 in an article titled *The Illusion of the Therapist's Power and The Patient's Fragility: My Rejoinder*. Within this article, Lazarus suggests that power is dynamic within the relationship, rather than static, and that counsellors can also be vulnerable within the therapeutic exchange through occurrences such as transference.

There can be several implications of this power differential that impact upon the counselling relationship. For instance, transference can occur during the counselling relationship - which arises when the client (or counsellor) subconsciously projects their own feelings onto the other. These feelings can be extremely destructive within the relationship and hinder progress - especially if those feelings of transference manifest a reluctance to co-operate. Sometimes the feelings may be romantic, whereby the client does not recognise the professional boundaries and projects their feelings - possibly from past events in their life - onto the counsellor. If the counsellor does not recognise their own responsibility and power over the client - if they do not possess an understanding of transference either - the counter-transference can occur in which the counsellor begins to reciprocate these feelings. Naturally, this leads to a breakdown of the helping relationship and is a breach of professional practice. Counsellors should recognise this power that they have within the counselling relationship and be very aware if it begins impacting the service. If at any point it is impacting upon the service and hindering the progress of the client, it is the responsibility of the counsellor to refer the client to another service provider.

## **References**

Koocher, G. P., & Keith-Spiegel, P. (1998). *Ethics in psychology: Professional standards and cases* (2nd ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.

Pope, K. S., & Vasquez, M. J. T. (2007). *Ethics in psychotherapy and counseling: A practical guide* (3rd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Zur, Ofer (No Date), *Power in Psychotherapy and Counselling: Rethinking the 'power differential' myth and exploring the moral, ethical, professional and clinical issues of power in therapy*, Accessed at: [http://www.zurinstitute.com/power\\_in\\_therapy.html](http://www.zurinstitute.com/power_in_therapy.html), Accessed on: 10/08/18  
- why there is an attempt to equalise

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### 3.3 Explain legal aspects of anti- discriminatory practice

*Students should explain the legal aspects of anti-discriminatory practice relating to counselling.*

*Word count: 400 minimum.*

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Understanding and ensuring anti-discriminatory practice is fundamental to the legal and ethical responsibilities of a professional counsellor. In general, anti-discriminatory practice refers to how clients may be disadvantaged on the basis of their race, age, gender, culture, ability or sexuality. The BACP provides an ethical framework which must govern and inform how professionals should practice counselling and psychotherapy - especially in regards to empathy and viewing a client within their unique 'frame of reference', taking into account a thorough understanding of different cultures and the diverse factors which will determine how the client perceives their own experiences. Separate institutions which employ counsellors will likely have their own ethical frameworks which will dictate the counsellor's practice: all of these, will be similar to the BACP ethical framework and will be in line with legal requirements. These frameworks will generally be written into the counsellor's legally binding contract.

The Equality Act 2010 is a legislative piece which was established to protect people from discrimination on the grounds of diversity. The diverse elements are referred to as 'protected characteristics' (Anon, No Date). These characteristics are named as: age, disability, gender re-assignment, marriage or civil partnership (in employment only), pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or believe, sex and sexual orientation. (Anon, No Date). The act protects people from discrimination within different contexts, including: employers, businesses & organisations which provide goods or services, health and care providers, someone you rent or buy a property from (including estate agents), providers of education, transport services and public bodies like local authorities and the government. Not only does this protect individuals who could be discriminated against due to a protected characteristic, but the act also protects those who may have a family member or friend who could be disadvantaged due to difference. This is referred to as 'discrimination by association' (Anon, No Date).

Whilst the Equality Acts services to protect people within the UK specifically, there are also laws established by the broader European Union which serve as anti-discriminatory measures to protect diversity and difference. For instance, the European Convention on Human Rights. The EU Convention on Human Rights protects people from discrimination through the establishment of different 'rights' possessed by all EU citizens. Rights which are easily relatable to professional counselling practice include: the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; the right to free expression; the right to free association and the right not to be discriminated against.

#### REFERENCES

Anonymous, No Date, 'Citizens Advice', *Equality Act 2010 - Discrimination and your rights*  
Accessed at: <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/law-and-courts/discrimination/about-discrimination/equality-act-2010-discrimination-and-your-rights/> Accessed on: 16/08/18