

15.02. 2012

Second Frankfurt Policy-Statement on Counselling

The DGVT specialists group "Forum Counselling" has issued a new "Frankfurt Position Paper on Counselling" and, just as we did ten years ago, we would like to stimulate discussion about counselling¹ among practitioners and academic specialists.

SECOND FRANKFURT POSITION PAPER ON COUNSELLING

Ten years ago, the Forum Counselling of the DGVT raised the question of the future of counselling in its **FIRST POSITION PAPER ON COUNSELLING** (www.forum-beratung-dgvt.de) and called for a new discourse about counselling. A decade later our forum is assessing the situation and taking a look at current counselling questions that still require answers. Our goal is once again to stimulate discussion about counselling among practitioners as well as academic specialists. We would like to have a debate that may also be controversial and we want to set forth our own position.

A world undergoing change has a need for counselling, but it requires a type of counselling that takes this change into account!

This thematic statement of the FIRST FRANKFURT POSITION PAPER continues to be equally valid today. Professional counselling operates under social and cultural conditions that have not changed fundamentally in the last ten years. However, counselling has become more independent and has begun to receive more public attention: the counselling discourse has been enriched by a multiplicity of relevant publications. Counselling is increasingly being taught at universities and political positions on counselling have found their place in new counselling associations.

¹ In comparison to the term "counselling" the German term "Beratung" is more comprehensive including guidance, advice giving, consultation etc.

Counselling has also become a fixed component of online media over the last ten years. Within these online media forms of information, help and advisory have come into being that did not exist before in this form, and through these new developments, counselling — online as offline — will also continue to be influenced in the future.

But our everyday experience continues to be permeated by counselling offers: by good as well as bad ones — in response to questions for which we must all continually search for satisfactory and, at least temporarily practicable, answers. Thus counselling is also subject to change: types of counselling offers, services, content, institutional associations, as well as social challenges and tasks are also undergoing change. Every counselling process is caught up within the tension between creating decision options and forcing decisions. It is in this way that the emphasis on information and knowledge in our society “produces” as its flip side further ignorance, insecurity, questioning, and even loss of orientation. This has consequences for counselling. There might be the danger that in counselling processes quick and simple solutions suggest certainty where reflections and careful considerations would be more appropriate. Often it is the case that counselling is put into play as forced decision-making, as expertise, as a quick solution, without thinking through the possible consequences and side effects. Concerning this we — Forum Counselling — think, that Counselling that is only offered as a commercial product for the solution to orientation, decision-making and planning problems carries with it the danger of becoming divorced from its proper helpful, problem-solving function.

Thus our first conclusion is:

Counselling in our everyday reality — from both academic and political points of view — has never been as relevant and multifaceted as it is today. But, at the same time, it has never been so much in danger of becoming too diffuse.

A differentiated palette of counselling offers doubtless has considerable advantages for all of us, but it also has disadvantages that should not be overlooked. There is a great danger that counselling in the process of diversification will lose its defined profile and become an empty term used to designate quite different things. *Counselling* that loses its “*core-meaning*” in this sense would endanger a range of professional counselling services (including those online) that have been established with high standards of quality in social, psychosocial, pedagogical, education-orientated and health-related fields of activity.

On the other hand, in the current opening-up and enlargement of the fields of application for counselling, there are also opportunities for change, new developments and contemporary adaptation. Thus we have to ask ourselves whether our “old” concepts, approaches and perspectives are still applicable and whether they are valid to the same extent for all those fields in which counselling is being practiced. So we need to ask: are we — counselling practitioners and counselling academic — working with concepts that have lost their significance and must be newly reformulated or made more precise? Generally speaking:

Where is there a danger that counselling could lose its (well-founded) meaning and where is it necessary to develop new criteria, concepts and approaches?

From our — Forum Counselling — perspective, there are nine areas that currently and for the future demand critical attention.

1. Counselling requires free will.

It is precisely because counselling as a form of intervention has been so successful in the past 30 years, that it is commonly encountered in such areas as social work, child care, education and health care, where a high degree of administrative power is exercised and where frequently and almost imperceptibly a shift from forms of communication that lend an admonitory or punitive character to “counselling” takes place. Thereby one of the most basic and most strongly emphasized standards in the discourse of counselling, namely “free will,” is called into question if punitive sanctions are to be expected when socially undesirable decisions or decisions that deviate from organizational or sponsoring institutional interests are made. In such situations, a form of coercion underlies the counselling conversation that may have threatening consequences for the person being counselled.

Nowadays we use terms like “coercive counselling” to refer to those counselling conversations which are supposed to meet all of the criteria for a counselling process — open-ended results, inclusion of emotional-affective factors, orientation towards real life experience — but, as in such cases as pregnancy conflict counselling, or student advising with respect to the timely completion of studies, or counselling with respect to eligibility for unemployment benefits², are initiated under some type of legal coercion. The problems connected with these situations today are not, however, limited to these institutional contexts. Such “coercive counselling” also takes place more or less explicitly in other areas.

If we remain committed to the defined goal of counseling communication, that is, to being psychosocially, communicatively, and situationally appropriate in our approach and offering the client a new orientation with respect to personal conflicts, disturbances, and developmental desires, then a coercive context is an obstacle to counselling. It is only with the precondition that counselling should be open-ended with respect to results and should follow the decision-making efforts and orientation needs of the one seeking advice without any coercive pressure that a confidential and trusting counselling relationship can come into being. Only such a relationship can set the counselor free to be empathetic and understanding and set the client

² Arbeitslosengeld II (ALG II)

free to be open to suggestions, new information, possible confrontation and emotional intervention.

Although the questions are becoming more complex with respect to the meaning of internal and external forms of coercion, we continue, as before, to be concerned with “free will,” but this is not sufficient to specify or clarify the questions. A counselling label that would here falsely signal possibilities of choice would not relieve theoreticians and practitioners of the task of developing suitable forms of support for people in coercive contexts. What we need here is a framework for discussing counselling with a view to old as well as new coercive contexts and to work out the specialized methodological bases for counselling under both negative and positive coercive pressure.

However, conversations that take place under the guise of counselling, but that are covertly forms of steering, are explicitly to be criticized and — with orientation towards the standards of professional counselling — to be clearly rejected. Working out the conditions under which there is not a good basis for counselling does not mean that we cannot act at all in coercive contexts. Rather, it is much more the case that we must throw open the question of what qualified form intervention can and should take if the preconditions for counselling are not present. Nevertheless, freedom of choice and free will remain methodological and ethical postulates for counselling, even when these are not empirical facts of the situation.

2. Counselling is not a commodity.

The privatization of publicly financed social services is proceeding at a rapid pace. Private enterprises are thus taking over the counselling market. From a conceptual perspective, this need not necessarily lead to a loss of quality in counselling services being offered as long as professional and ethical standards are preserved. It becomes problematic, however, when under private conditions, not only fees are charged for counselling, but it is also offered as a commercial product with orientation towards profit and it appears as something to be passively consumed. “Commodification” describes the consequent alteration that can be observed in counselling when it is marketed as a product. Counselling has already become a commodity in many situations where it is on offer in competition with other providers and products and is supposed to be consumed by counselling “customers.” It is not only counselling in business enterprises that is being marketed, other forms of counselling are also involved in attracting customers. Counsellors present themselves as competent service providers and guarantees of success are given. Counselling quality is replaced by effect-producing façades. Critical perspectives are eliminated since they might potentially be bad for business.

For counselling as a professionally valuable and academic research-orientated service within public and non-profit institutions that came into being through a multiplicity of social and anti-consumerist movements as well as humanistic welfare-orientated perspectives, the move

towards privatized, profit-orientated service providers carries with it the danger of replacing professional content with superficially attractive appearances.

If counselling is now only foregrounded as a marketable and profit-orientated product, clients with their various life experiences only play the role of “consumer” and counsellors become sales representatives. Examples of this type of development can be observed in various fields ranging from the financial sector to educational and health-related areas. Counselling must put up resistance here. It must be dedicated to the interests of the help-seekers, and remain within the framework of its professionalism as fundamentally orientated towards client and subject empowerment, whether this is in private or publicly funded settings. Counselling cannot be reduced to a cheap product exclusively within the realm of business logic. In the final analysis, counselling services, like educational services, are a valuable sociocultural entity.

3. Counselling requires navigation through an overwhelming array of data, information, and advice.

Thanks to the internet, practically any type of information is now accessible to everyone at any time and from any place. The latest generation of smartphones makes it possible for a user to have at his/her fingertips articles on particular topics or even to download whole books. However, this easy accessibility and large amount of information does not always lead to accurate information or to being better informed. Clients and counselors are at the mercy of this flood of information and are not always able to filter out the most important details or to make a reliable assessment of what they encounter. Improved information access does not necessarily lead to an improvement in being well-informed.

People seeking help today often come to counselling already furnished with information and with the desire for assistance in dealing with aspects that may appear ambiguous or questionable. Counselling is increasingly becoming a kind of information processing with the goal of transforming information that appears to be divorced from any context (not only on the internet) into knowledge that relates to individual real-life experience and is relevant to their personal behavior.

It is not only a question of “what” — which information is usable and which is not. Just as important is to reflect on “how”, “when,” and “how much.” In using online information we all must be aware of how reliable information appears to be. Does it have the status of what is merely an assumption or are facts being communicated? Is it presented as one option among many or as the only relevant point?

To be client-oriented in dealing with information also means determining whether right now is the best moment to communicate certain information. Can additional information be accepted and tolerated by the client or is he/she at the limit of what can be taken in? Or would it be

better to encourage an independent search by the client and/or provide him or her with some research skills? Establishing confidence in counselling requires a thoughtful handling of information and a sensitive approach to information processing.

4. Counselling has developed a new presence on the internet.

In recent years, counselling on the internet has become an independent and expected part of the contemporary counselling landscape. From data-driven information and social networking to professional counselling media websites — everything is open to public participation — whether the goal is to seek information, to obtain counselling or just the desire to be entertained.

Counselling has long had a full-fledged internet presence: In “web 1.0” it was established in its professional form in a fixed, reliable, and many-faceted institution-related position. In “web 2.0” there is also “counselling 2.0” in the sense of counselling forms that are directly relevant to everyday life of whatever kind (this includes: counselling blogs, counselling networks, etc.). In addition to professional counselling, everyday counselling has also taken on its own web media presence in social networks.

Alongside professional counselling practice, online counselling has recently given rise to its own academic-interdisciplinary discourse. Counselling has thus become more diverse, more mobile and more flexible; but it has also become open to misuse in both its form and content. It seems to be a particular feature of German-language online offers that they can profit from the high quality of a wide range of offers from institutional service providers. These providers have frequently expanded their offers with online variants and thus have ensured a high quality and reliable service. Transparency, trustworthiness, security, and professional competence continue to be the foundation of counselling offers that users can have confidence in. But this does not apply to everything that appears on the internet under the heading of counselling. In multimedia social networks without institutional connections, not only is everyday counselling offered, but frequently there also hidden commercial motives and thus a subtle form of misuse of information occurs.

5. Counselling can no longer be adequately described with the categories of “old” counselling approaches (“old schools”) that are taken for granted.

With the rapid and radical social changes and frequently ambiguous information that we all have to deal with, difficulties with orientation, prediction and planning increase; being in possession of more information does not necessarily make decisions any easier. At the same time, public institutions and organisations increasingly delegate risky orientation, planning and

decision-making tasks to the individual and withdraw themselves from social responsibility for safety and security. Counselling services should accompany the individual in all areas of his/her life and support him/her in these tasks. When clients looking for help find themselves facing ambivalent and paradoxical challenges and when their ability – if they have any – to make prognosis is restricted only to short-term, many traditional counselling approaches reach their limit. In particular, individual-centered, rationalistic counselling models in apparently “objective” fields (such as career counselling, counselling in health care, organizational counselling, etc.) based on strict, no-frills, autonomous decision and planning competences are in need of fundamental revision. Counselling must always and everywhere provide for the integration of intuition and creativity in decision-making, planning and behavioral assistance and must always and everywhere reflect the incorporation of these individual processes into personal relationships and social networks.

Counselling as an academic discipline is thus required to develop new and alternative theories and practices. What are needed are concepts that help to secure an identity within social integration and that also support personal and social empowerment processes. At the same time, these concepts must also enhance a positive approach to uncertainty and insecurity. Counselling can and must incorporate intuition and emotion alongside rationality and, even in the face of ambiguous and contradictory challenges, reinforce a sense of coherence and optimism about meeting and overcoming these challenges. Attempts at social construction and counselling models of “positive uncertainty,” “planned happenstance” and “serendipity” offer new theoretical and practical perspectives. Persons looking for help thereby take on the role of “self-motivating” constructors of their world and are thus supported in developing personal identities within social communities and in becoming (co-)creators and self-conscious actors in their own life stories and their futures.

6. Counselling should not be professionalized according to the legal pattern set up for psychotherapy.

The legal situation of psychotherapy is not a model for a more formal and justifiable regulation of the practice of counselling. First of all, counselling is not practiced in only one social arena, nor is it possible to designate just one goal category — in contrast to “healing”, “orientation” is concerned with various thematic areas and forms of life experience. On the other hand, in connection with the legal situation of psychotherapy, there have been consequences for the content of the therapy, as well as for the professional and financial situation that should not be repeated for the field of counselling (narrow limitation to just a few preparatory disciplines and procedures, getting stuck in medical models of treatment and healing, establishing more and more individual practices with accompanying lengthening of patient waiting time for treatment, minimal concern with prevention, cooperation and crisis intervention, etc.).

Such efforts in the direction of strict formal or politically-orientated limitations of counselling would also not necessarily lead to better quality, if they are only in favor of professional associations and training institutions. They also do not make accessibility and availability of counselling services any easier, particularly for those population groups who are especially in need of support or are disadvantaged. In addition, they devalue a variety of informal and semi-professional counselling services that are of great significance in a wide range of everyday settings.

The quality of counselling and counselling competence is less a product of formalized regulations and certifications concerning who, for whom, how and with what additional qualifications someone is allowed to engage in counselling. More important are: academic and research-based efforts to establish qualified training within appropriate university degree-programs and further education settings; improving existing counselling services with stronger life experience and resource-orientation; a stronger connection between counselling and everyday organized help and self-help efforts as well as community engagement. In this context, counselling in less formal and informal everyday settings should be valued and expanded.

7. In every sphere in which it operates, counselling must continually come to terms with questions of diversity.

Although counselling as form of professional intervention is fundamentally conceived of as open-ended with respect to results, client-centered and relevant to real-world experience, regional requirements as well as the necessity of creating structures within institutions and training programs nevertheless lead to narrowing perspectives. A particular spectrum of concerns becomes the central theme. Diagnoses and the interpretation of case studies construct types of clients. This does not do justice to the diversity of themes, problems and counselling concerns that arise from social differentiation and societal developments.

In what languages should we spread information about counselling services? What information pools should be provided? Should we try out new working procedures or arrange special services for particular groups of clients? Do we need to rethink the ease of access to counselling services? Is counselling in its present form really open to immigrants, gays, lesbians, transgendered people, the young and the old, and the undocumented and/or those living in extreme poverty...? Questions of this type are not theoretical questions for specialized institutions, but are, rather, a continual accompaniment to every professional counselling practice.

8. Counselling should not be evaluated according to one-dimensional efficiency criteria.

The tightening of resources for publicly-funded social services and the tendency towards privatization among the associated “service-providers” have led to a new strictness with respect to success-evaluation in counselling. Many sponsors are now demanding documented evidence of the positive effects of counselling in child-rearing, education, psychosocial work and healthcare services. To demand carefulness in handling public resources and the documentation of effective use is certainly not unreasonable. However, a simplistic case-specific proof of success is not possible for what are usually complex counselling processes. The importance of that type of help which counselling offers (as distinct from information services, training or teaching) lies precisely in being able to empathize with individual goals, constellations of values and forms of emotional processing peculiar to particular clients.

Openness in counselling is thus a pre-condition for achieving such goals as discovering personal resources and the broadening of individual behavioral options — an operationalized measurement of pre-established goals to be reached by fixed times is therefore inadequate. In addition, the basic need to ensure the confidentiality of all communications within counselling makes this form of evaluation problematic. Precisely in contrast to administration in employment, social work and healthcare, as well as in comparison with sponsors who are primarily interested in demonstrating achievement and efficiency, the guarantee of protected confidentiality in counselling is especially important.

It is our position that counselling requires appropriate procedures for evaluation and to determine its effectiveness: activity reports (numbers of cases and case summaries) document working procedures and the scope of an individual institution. Quality controls (case conferences, further education, supervision) ensure the capacity for development. Specialized evaluation procedures by experts determine the perception, acceptance and judgment of counselling processes and make possible the participation of the users. Independent effectiveness research analyses frameworks, concepts, and methods of counseling as well as features of counselor behavior and context-related studies document the influence of counselling services on the surrounding cultures and milieus and also reveal unintended effects and/or “counselling-damages.”

9. Counselling quality is also guaranteed by counselling research.

Counselling research is counselling research — not therapy research. It must be further developed as an independent branch of research — beyond claiming to be the only representative of the experimental-statistical paradigm and not focused on a list of modularized interventions. Methods of counselling are not patent medicines and counselling is not the prescription of medicine.

Research in the field of counselling starts from the assumption that quantitative and qualitative research plans and procedures, reconstructive and narrative descriptions, practice-evaluations

and field studies are all desirable as central elements of research. It is not merely hypothesis-testing that is the central focus, but rather exploratory studies and an empirically-based theory development that are essential. Most important is that the relationship between theory and practice is not understood as prescriptive or instructional; it is more the case that the research stimulates the practice and engages in dialogue with it (for example, in behavioral research projects).

The potential to support and encourage resources and health lies at the center of our concerns, much more so than reducing deficits and problems. The essential qualities of counselling are: multiple perspectives, an interdisciplinary and multi-professional outlook, emphasis on free will and open-ended results, confidentiality and services provided without cost. These contexts and counselling dimensions are also central to counselling research. Participatory research taking into account the varying perspectives and relevance of all the parties involved must become a part of the accepted ordinary research approach. Diversity is not to be treated as problematic variable in investigations, but rather considered as a value in itself and one of the most important current research concerns. The criteria for judging “outcomes” should not be merely the greater “efficiency” of counselling services in the sense of “keeping in check” social problems, rather the focus should be primarily on the significance and usefulness for the client. Research for the purpose of legitimation is not the appropriate future for counselling research.

How can you participate in further politically–based discussion of counselling?

We also regard this SECOND FRANKFURT POSITION PAPER as a call to stimulate discussion among a circle of colleagues. We have formulated what we regard as the currently significant fundamental issues. Perhaps you see many aspects in a similar light or you might also view the situation in a completely different way. Let us talk about it and thereby continue to secure and improve the quality of counselling.

For the Forum Counselling of the DGVT, Frankfurt, January 2012:

Vera Bamler, Frank Engel, Ruth Großmaß, Albert Lenz, Frank Nestmann, Ingeborg Schürmann, Ursel Sickendiek, Jillian Werner, Daniel Wilhelm