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## The Process of Counselling: A Spiral Model

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### Abstract

Students must often attempt to understand the dynamic process of counselling, within a framework of models which largely represent it as a linear, sequential process. The "spiral model" being proposed represents a shift from a mechanistic, linear conception of counselling to one which places emphasis on the dynamic, fluid nature of the interaction between client and counsellor. This model may assist practitioners in conceptualizing counselling from a more holistic perspective. It also recognizes and validates the interdependence of client and counsellor in providing direction and generating movement within the counselling process.

### Résumé

Les étudiants doivent le plus souvent tenter de comprendre le processus dynamique du counseling à l'intérieur d'un cadre de référence de modèles qui le représente largement comme un processus linéaire, séquentiel. Le "modèle en spirale," proposé ici, représente un mouvement de la conception du counseling comme étant mécanistique, linéaire vers un modèle qui place l'emphase sur la dynamique, la nature fluide de l'interaction entre le client et le conseiller. Ce modèle pourrait assister les praticiens à conceptualiser le counseling dans une perspective plus holistique. Il aide aussi à reconnaître et à valider l'interdépendance du client et du conseiller en offrant une direction et en générant un mouvement à l'intérieur même du processus de counseling.

### Introduction

A paradigm shift has been occurring in Western culture in recent years, in response to the "conceptual restrictions and limitations of Cartesian-Newtonian mechanism" (Lucas, 1985, p. 170). The science of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries relied on the Cartesian method of analyzing the world into its constituent parts. These units were arranged according to linear and deterministic perceptions of reality (Barclay, 1984; Bozarth, 1985; Capra, 1982; Lucas, 1985). In recognition of the fact that the "physical world (can) not be separated into independently existing elements or isolated entities" (Lucas, 1985, p. 166) theorists have called for a new vision of reality, one which is based on a general systems view of life. This is a view which takes into account "the interrelatedness and interdependence of all phenomena — physical, biological, psychological, social and cultural" (Capra, 1982, p. 265).

Contrary to the "rigid causality" and "inexorable determinism" (Lucas, 1985, p. 166) of the Cartesian-Newtonian perspective, social scientists are underscoring the need to view the human person as an "integrative whole involving interdependent physical, psychological, social, and cultural patterns" (Lucas, 1985, p. 170). In calling for a new approach to understanding and studying human behaviour, theorists are underscoring the importance of "intersubject understanding, not

simply dispassionate observation" (Lucas, 1985, p. 170). According to Bozarth (1985), the principles of the new paradigm must place emphasis on relationships rather than their isolated parts; on the inherent dynamics of these relationships, on process thinking, and on holistic thinking.

In the area of counsellor education, the Cartesian-Newtonian perspective has left its mark. The microskills approach to training burgeoned in the seventies and eighties, and with it came an emphasis on "linear stage models of training... designed to inculcate a rational, step-by-step mind-set in trainees" (Peavy, 1985, p. 149). The prominent models of counselling present the counselling process and counsellor training methods as a set of stages and/or phases, ranging from two to nine (Brammer, 1979; Carkhuff, 1969; Egan, 1982; 1986; Long, Paradise & Long, 1984; Okun, 1987). While some models do provide for feedback loops and stepback, the overriding feature of these models is their basic adherence to a "simplistic linear model of causality" (West, 1985, p. 198).

For example, Long et al. (1984) propose a three-phase model, suggesting that counselling progresses from exploration, to integration to action. Brammer (1979) proposes a two-phase model of relationship building and facilitating positive action, with four stages associated with each phase. In 1982, Egan proposed a one-phase and three-stage model, differentiating between counsellor and client behaviours of attending, responding, exploring, understanding and acting. Recognizing the difficulty in transferring such a linear conception of causality to actual practice, in his later work Egan (1986) attempted to apply a three circle metaphor to more accurately describe the counselling process. In a similar vein, Peavy (1985) used a wheel metaphor to present his Social Integration Model.

Recognizing the limitations of these counselling models in representing reality as it exists within each client/counsellor interaction, qualification is suggested by the originators of these models. For example, Caulfield (1986) states that "all clients need not experience all phases of the process in the sequence described" (p. 309). Egan (1986) suggests that readers view his counselling model as an "organic," rather than "linear" conceptualization, since the "phases of helping... are not always as differentiated and sequential" (p. 56), or as "clean, clear and linear in practice" (p. 36) as his model might suggest. Students of counselling are encouraged to be flexible in their approach. They are told that some stages and/or activities may not occur for all clients, and may even be repeated by some clients, one or more times during the counselling process (Egan, 1986; Robertshaw, Mecca & Rerick, 1978). However, guidelines are generally not provided to assist the practitioner in determining when such repetition is required, when certain stages are unnecessary, and for which clients.

From such a linear perspective, the counsellor is viewed as the

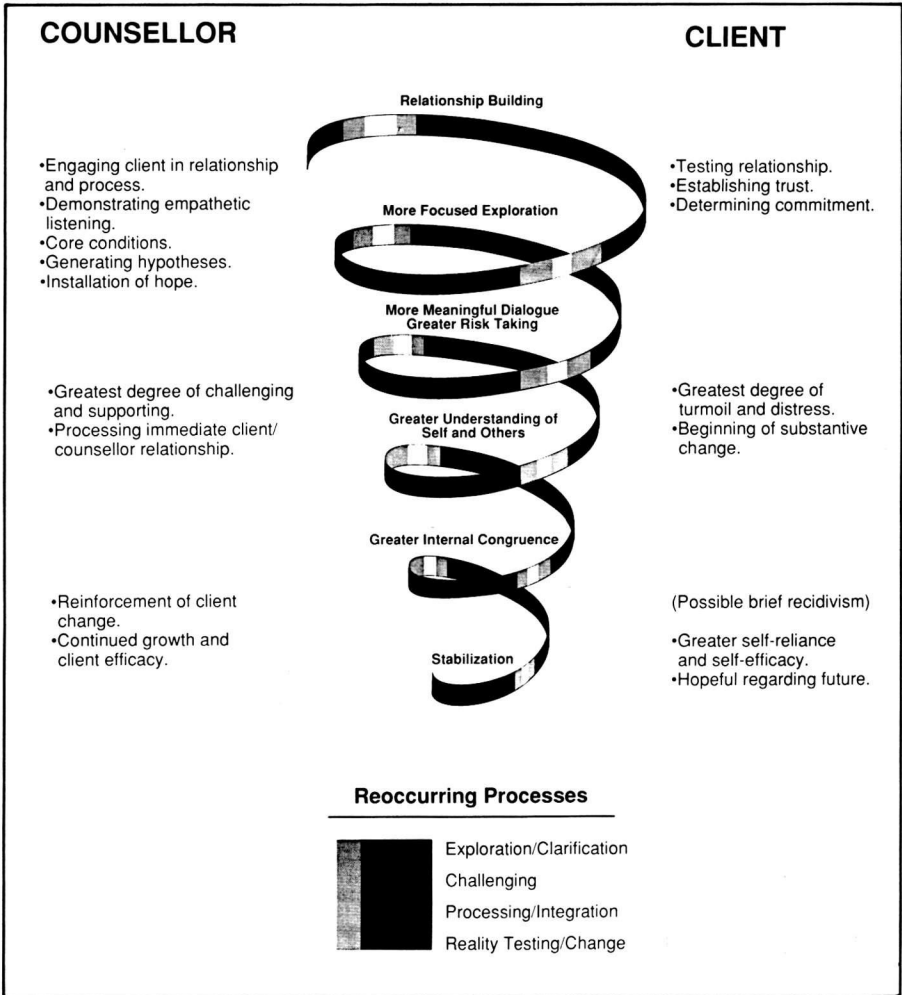
proactive agent of change, facilitating client decision making and/or behaviour change, while the client is viewed as reactive in responding to the counsellor's interventions. The focus is placed on the counsellor for determining the goals, direction and process of counselling, relatively independent of the actions and reactions of the client. This type of thinking ignores the interdependence and interrelatedness of counsellor and client, and fosters a segmented view of the counselling interaction.

If we allow that the client also is proactive and capable of causing things to happen both in and outside of counselling, then our unit of focus must become not the intervention but the transaction or interaction. (West, 1985, p. 198)

Neophyte counsellors are often left with a rigid understanding of the steps through which they feel they are responsible for guiding their clients, if they are to negotiate the stages/phases of the counselling process. Alternatively, they become confused when such linear conceptions of causality do not transfer to their interactions with clients outside of the training setting.

While stage models are useful in reducing a process to its component parts for the purposes of conceptualization and intervention, these models can also "cast development as unidirectional, hierarchical, sequenced in time, cumulative and irreversible—ideas that are not supported by commanding evidence" (Brim & Kagan, 1980, p. 13). Such mechanistic ways of thinking have "long encouraged an 'engineering' approach to physical health care in which illness is reduced to a form of mechanical malfunction and medical therapy to a species of technical manipulation" (Lucas, 1985, 170). The social sciences and counselling in particular are not exempt from such criticism (Barclay, 1984; Bozarth, 1985; Peavy, 1985; West, 1985).

As counsellor educators, we are faced with attempting to articulate and teach students about the dynamic, interactional nature of the counselling process. This is a process in which the momentum and progression are intricately related to the unique needs, values, communication patterns, skills and abilities of the interdependent members of the counselling relationship. Within the confines of a language that may not adequately provide the syntax and vocabulary to explain such a process, our present counselling models and conceptualizations provide a certain elegance and clarity by breaking the whole down into its component parts. While such reductionism is particularly helpful in skill identification and training, it remains difficult to comprehend the whole from the segmentation of its parts. In training students about counselling, we are left to address the apparent depth and applicability of our linear counselling models, to the interactive processes which actually take place outside of the training centre. We must also take into account the heterogeneous client populations which are serviced by counsellors, and the diverse theoretical orientations of the many counselling practitioners.



**FIGURE 1**  
*Spiral model of counselling*

The “spiral model” presented in this paper was conceived in response to the paradigm shift which appears to be taking place in Western thinking (Bozarth, 1985; Capra, 1982). From a more systemic perspective, emphasis is placed on the inherent interdependence of the counselling relationship and process. An attempt is made to maintain the integrity of the whole, while providing enough specificity to provide direction and guide practice. The present model acknowledges the contribution and interaction of both counsellor and client in directing the counselling process. Also, while recognizing the value of reductionism in terms of micro skills training and acquisition, the present paper represents the author’s attempt to broaden our unit of focus to include a more integrated and process-oriented view of the counselling interaction.

### *The Spiral Metaphor*

The model of counselling proposed represents counselling as analogous to a reverse spiral. The counselling interaction progresses at increasingly deeper and more focused levels as the participants move towards achieving their goal of client efficacy and satisfaction. The spiral metaphor may best be seen as representative of a bidirectional metaprocess, that is driven by the motivations, values, skills and needs of both client and counsellor in dynamic and interdependent interaction. Each successive revolution of the spiral reflects greater focusing and organization, while emphasizing fluidity of process. Contrary to a more linear conception of counselling however, while movement on the spiral may account for more focused and intense interaction, it also takes into account the retrogression and avoidance that may occur throughout the counselling interaction. At such times the client may regress to a discussion of more diffuse and less relevant or emotionally sensitive issues, again testing the relationship and perhaps grappling with questions of trust and commitment. As new issues are raised and important material is uncovered, the client and counsellor may be conceptually seen to traverse the spiral, with both retrogression and progression viewed as occurring on a continuum within the counselling relationship. Changes occur in the dimension of the spiral, while the basic integrity of the structure is maintained (see Figure 1).

Counsellor behaviours and interventions are represented on the left of the spiral. Primary client behaviours and experiences are represented on the right. Behaviours represented correspond to the level of intensity, the degree of risk-taking and focused exploration that characterize the counselling interaction at any point in time.

In the “spiral model,” exploration/clarification, challenging, processing/integration and reality testing are conceptualized as processes carried out at both an intra- and interpersonal level. These processes

reoccur throughout the counselling interaction, and serve to promote continued movement. The processes are graphically represented throughout the spiral, to reinforce their primacy throughout the counselling, rather than to being limited to earlier and/or later points within the interaction. Shaded gradients are not meant however, to correspond to each specific process. The gradients merely serve to reinforce the continued importance of these processes throughout the counselling. With their first contact, both client and counsellor will begin to challenge, explore and process their interaction. They will thereby set the stage and determine the direction of further interactions.

The counselling process is viewed as additive and interactive. Client behaviours influence counsellor responses and counsellor behaviours influence client responses. The spiral analogue allows for continual redefinition of the problem as successive insights are gained. It also allows for continual reality testing of alternatives, with topic fusing into topic and thought eliciting further thought. As greater depth and meaning is realized, the intensity of the interaction increases. It is the mutual engagement of client and counsellor in accurate and focused exploration, clarification and challenging, which facilitates client growth. This interaction produces energy which drives the process and provides momentum. The client and counsellor will adopt a personally relevant mode of learning; cognitive, affective and/or behavioural, with integration and change then becoming systems in and of themselves.

The counselling process is conceptualized as one of reciprocal influence. Causality is viewed as multiple and transactional, with both parties providing direction and movement. Both client and counsellor are viewed as proactive, in that they exert overt and covert influence on the other and on the process of their interaction. Both are also reactive, in that they respond to and are guided by the actions and reactions of the other. The skills, beliefs, values and perceptions of both parties will be brought to the interaction and will join the counsellor and client in "synergistic interrelationship" (Lucas, 1985, p. 165).

### *The Counselling Process*

The counselling process is initiated when the client and/or some significant other in the client's world experiences dissatisfaction, confusion or frustration and the client's own efforts to effect change have not been successful. At times, clients may enter counselling with a clearly defined issue or problem they wish to resolve, such as the termination of an addictive disorder, a problem with impulse control, relationship difficulties or career indecision. On other occasions clients present issues which are not nearly as clear, such as general feelings of lethargy, inability to make or act upon important life decisions, or feelings of

worthlessness or inadequacy. The client's articulation of difficulty provides the grounding, upon which the counsellor superimposes his/her theoretical orientation, in an attempt to understand the nature of the problem(s), and to determine the focus and direction of intervention.

At the outset of counselling, the counsellor attempts to engage clients in the counselling relationship, by listening attentively while clients begin to explore their world. The counsellor attempts to create an environment in which clients are free to engage in such exploration. As client dialogue begins to shift from a more external focus on diffuse details and relationships to a more internalized exploration of self, the counsellor becomes increasingly familiar with clients' perspectives on their world. Guided by theory, the counsellor may begin to generate hypotheses regarding the nature and dimensions of the client's difficulty. Hypotheses which are not substantiated with further exploration are discarded. New hypotheses are supported or refuted as counselling progresses. The counsellor's belief in the efficacy of the therapeutic process is verbally and non-verbally communicated to the client, thereby instilling hope in the client for successfully meeting the goals of counselling.

Clients generally begin the counselling process by testing the counselling relationship, to determine the safety of the relationship and the trustworthiness of the counsellor. Consequently, the initial exploration engaged in by the client is often at a superficial level, with minimal risk-taking and introspection occurring. If the interaction between client and counsellor is facilitative in generating mutual hope, trust and commitment, the client will begin to risk being "known," and will undertake a more focused exploration. The onset of such introspective exploration is indicative of client commitment to the counselling relationship and to the counselling process.

As the process transpires, client and counsellor will advance into a deeper level of experiencing, with the client delving into often uncharted emotional and/or psychic waters. The counsellor provides challenging feedback as well as the encouragement and support essential to clients as they explore their more critical and salient life issues. The interaction is much more focused during such times, with both client and counsellor intimately connected in a process of discovery, learning and healing. Specific themes are identified and clients may be seen to be actively "working" at discovering the relationships between their internal and external experiences. At these critical moments in counselling, clients engage with the counsellor, in an attempt to understand how their thoughts, feelings and behaviours have been formulated, and how these continue to influence critical life decisions, relationships and experiences. The counsellor challenges clients to face the contradictions inherent in their perceptions, cognitions, feelings and/or behaviour, while providing the necessary emotional safety and support for such introspective dis-

covery. At such times “the outer and inner observer stand in a relationship of complementarity” (Ruesch, 1962, p. 92).

The awareness of both client and counsellor may be expanded at such times, promoting further movement and growth. Given the intensity of the interaction, the client and/or counsellor may retreat to less threatening levels and/or topics of focus. Issues of trust and commitment may resurface, or both parties may require some emotional distance to process their new learnings. Throughout their interaction, the counsellor and client are learning more about the client’s world. The counsellor may also be involved in new self-focused learning, especially related to issues of countertransference.

As a result of this process of narrowing and expanding, clients begin to make substantive changes. Such changes may occur in terms of clients’ attitudes, expectations, or perceptions of themselves and others, in terms of their thoughts and feelings, or in terms of specific behaviour change. Clients who have been emotionally battering themselves for a past transgression may come to understand the appropriateness of their behaviour given the context within which it occurred; and forgive themselves accordingly. Clients who carry painful memories of their youth may learn to understand and forgive their parents. Clients who have been immobilized by fear may learn to face and understand the dimensions of their fears, and be freed to risk acting on their desires. Clients who have been experiencing the emotional pain of having lost a loved one may learn to experience and accept their grief, without letting it consume them. Through their relationship with clients, and based upon their theoretical knowledge and understanding of the life-span developmental process, the counsellor may guide clients through the emotional and cognitive work which will allow them to access, develop and act upon the resources necessary to meet their goals and live in a more satisfying manner.

Awareness of client growth and change is realized progressively throughout the counselling interaction, in what often amounts to a “two steps forward and one step back” progression. Eventually however, major client turmoil and distress subsides and there is a solidification of this growth and change. Such change may be manifest in terms of client behaviours, perceptions, feelings, values and/or beliefs. Equality is restored to the relationship (Miller, 1986). In learning to understand themselves and others, and in attempting to act upon that understanding, clients come to terms with their “own truths.” Clients begin to experience an internal congruence between their values, beliefs, thoughts, feelings and behaviour. They begin to recognize their own potential for efficacy in meeting life’s challenges. Issues which were focused on earlier in counselling are often recycled by clients at this point in the process, with the intent of highlighting their growth and progress. In reinforcing



the progress which the client has made, the counsellor supports the client's efforts towards self-reliance and self-efficacy.

There is normally a recognition on the part of both the counsellor and client, that their "work" together has been completed to whatever degree possible at that time. Clients may require time to live and process the changes they have made in counselling, or may feel that greater change and the integration of such change may be undertaken without further counselling intervention. In spite of a sometimes brief period of recidivism, clients leave the confines of the counselling relationship with feelings of hopefulness regarding their ability to deal with what the future may bring; and with a sense of loss at the termination of an intimate and supportive relationship. If clients have made substantive changes during the process of counselling, and have learned to access and/or develop their internal and external resources, they are generally able to utilize their new learning in meeting further life challenges and demands. The interdependent nature of the counselling relationship is severed, with both parties having gained qualitatively from the interaction. Clients transfer their new learnings into other important relationships and situations, and the counsellor brings new learnings of self and others to future counselling interactions.

### *Progress Along the Spiral*

The pace at which counselling progresses is related to the counsellor's sensitivity, knowledge and skills, as well as his/her ability to engage in an intimate, interdependent relationship. Progress is also related to client readiness and facility in dealing with such cognitive and emotional material, as well as the depth and severity of client distress. One component cannot be extracted from the other. The most skilled and astute counsellor will not be able to assist the client who is not yet ready to proceed with the level of commitment and introspection required for growth. By the same token, the most self-aware and committed client will rarely achieve substantive progress within a counselling relationship with an unskilled, insensitive counsellor.

Some clients are particularly adept at analytical thinking and others are exceptionally introspective. With such clients, the counsellor's work is often made easier, as the client readily and adeptly draws the necessary connections between relationships, and works actively at processing and integrating the material being explored. Movement may be quite rapid, with stabilization occurring in six to ten sessions. For other clients, counselling may progress at a substantially slower pace. The counsellor may need to redefine and reiterate the relationships between the client's internal and external experiencing many times and at many levels throughout the process. In such cases counselling may progress slowly and painstakingly, over a period of many months.

### *Implications for Training*

According to Peavy (1985):

technological models . . . tend to develop a reliance in trainees upon external guidance in the form of techniques, recipes, scales and other explicit guidelines for performance . . . the technological model and its accompanying mentality fosters segmented thinking. (p. 149)

Micro-skill training and linear models of counselling serve to reduce the ambiguity and complexity of the counselling process. These models assist in providing neophyte counsellors with discrete units, by which they can measure their learning. As with the artist, such structured frameworks present the building blocks upon which the counsellor's talents and skills in the area of human understanding and interaction are built.

When focus remains on the parts of the system, however, the integrity of the whole is often lost. When the rational, step-by-step mind set in which counselling students have been indoctrinated, does not transfer neatly to the world outside the training centre, or when the specific skills and interventions that facilitated growth with one client do not effect a similar response in another client, trainees are often at a loss to understand why (Halgin, 1985). Having been taught that they are the active agents in the counselling process, complete with their armamentarium of skills and techniques, failure to effect the desired response from the client is often met with confusion.

If, however, in training our students, we superimposed a more holistic, systemic and ecological view of the counselling process, that underscores the interdependence of the counselling relationship, we would in effect be promoting a "broader, richer, and infinitely more humane approach" (Lucas, 1985, p. 170) to counselling. In so doing, the observed outcomes of counselling would be attributed to the dynamic interaction between client and counsellor. Both parties would be perceived as active agents of change. By focusing on the whole, rather than just the parts of the counselling interaction, students may become more cognizant in recognizing not only the skills and knowledge which they bring to shape this process, but the unique characteristics, needs and behaviours of the client which also serve to shape the interaction.

By presenting counsellor trainees with an understanding of the dynamic nature of the counselling process, as represented in the spiral model, students will be encouraged to incorporate a more holistic understanding of the interaction between client and counsellor. The micro skills that they learn will then be placed within a larger context of the interrelatedness and interdependence; a context that presents a more realistic conception of causality. Students may also learn to attend to the "more fluid structures such as improvisation, tacit knowing,

intuition, metaphoric thinking, chance and serendipity" (Peavy, 1985, p. 149). In so doing, trainees may be free to experience the "unity of mutual surrender to a greater whole between therapist and client" (Bozarth, 1985, p. 181).

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