Contemporary Counseling and Its Discontents: A Counselologist on Homo Consultants

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The paper addresses risks and threats inherent in the “counseling boom”, which has affected the actual modes of help provision in guidance/counseling, and generated a unique “counseling fashion” for counseling of various kinds and hence, of various quality. Offering a critical analysis of counseling, the author proposes a few hypotheses about the phenomenon and posits that: (1) Some of the current counseling interventions—also within career counseling—are clearly market-driven; (2) Neoliberal (and post-neoliberal) social policies, as well as stratification of society, have prompted changes in the counselor’s role, who is no longer a creator of unique social services but, with the services having been marketized, has become a “commodity supplier”; and (3) Contemporary homo consultants, falling into the “clutches” of experts, becomes dependent on counselors, who exert power over him/her and appropriate his/her life.

Keywords: counseling boom, wilfing, marketization of counseling, counselor’s role changes, search for another human being, dependency on counselors

Introduction

This paper addresses risks and threats inherent in the “counseling boom”, which has observably affected the actual modes of help provision in guidance/counseling and generated a unique “counseling fashion”: a rapidly spreading vogue for counseling of various kinds and, hence, of various quality. The aim of this paper is to critique the current developments in counseling based on the hypothesis that many (perhaps most) contemporary counseling interventions, also within career counseling, are a predominantly market-driven enterprise. Before embarking on this critical task, the author needs to state the obvious: neoliberal (and post-neoliberal) social policies, coupled with the social stratification, have altered the role of counselors: Once the creators of unique social services, they have become “commodity suppliers” as the services have turned marketable goods. In this context, the author will reflect on the current condition of the homo consultants¹ and offer further, in his opinion, highly plausible, hypotheses about the causes and ramifications of the counseling boom.

Discussion

It hardly needs arguing that we inhabit a multifaceted and rapidly changing world. The complexities of

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¹The Latin term has been adopted by Alicja Kargulowa to denote not only a counselee but also any advice-seeking person, with advice-seeking identified as a typically human engagement recognizably intensified in the modern era.

contemporary reality—revolutionary advancements in communication, a dynamic expansion of science and technology, and the concomitant radical changes in work and organization of labor—are manifest in social and cultural transformations ubiquitous not only in European societies but also across the world. These changes have all but “abrogated” culture as described by Margaret Mead, and to say this is not to propose a hypothesis but to state the obvious. Namely, they not only annihilated the postfigurative and cofigurative cultural patterns, but also effaced the prefigurative model, producing a gaping generational divide: a cultural “gulf” that separates parents from children. Unable to keep up with the accelerated changes, the former refuse to learn from their offspring, who in their turn are hardly eager to “share” with their knowledge and skills, through which they create a world of their own. This world tends to be a virtual one, consisting of social networks, Facebooks, Twitters, and e-mails. The inhabitants of this world communicate and seek information in specific modes and manners, involving a novel language different from the language of traditional books. And the books themselves are rarely, if ever, resorted to.

That the author refers to “information” and not to “knowledge”, here is a fully purposeful word choice. The author posits, namely, that a substantial proportion of the multitude of young school-goers and university students seek first of all functional, instantly applicable information, which could be put into use here and now. Impelled by such motivation, they form “a swarm”, to render it metaphorically, which pursues information rather than knowledge², the goal attainable without the perusal of books—the computer alone suffices. As Robert Siewiorek (2013) observes,

Traditional books rely on long thought sequences and intricate argumentation, which gradually lead the readers toward conclusions that the author intended for them to arrive at. The Internet does not operate in this way. On the Internet, we do not need to follow the author dutifully.... Knowledge transmitted and obtained here is “networked knowledge”—accumulated through links which propose interconnections among ideas, sprawling in all directions at the same time. Instead of a logically sequenced series of facts, we are confronted with complexity and chaos that are supposed to reflect the nature of the modern world. The chaos penetrates into our consciousness. It alters the ways in which we think and read. But we do not read e-books on the Internet; instead, we just wilf them. An acronym for “What was I looking for?”, “wilfing” denotes a type of mental activity characteristic of our involvement with the computer. (p. 31)

Thus, we could legitimately hypothesize that when answering the fundamental question of “What was I looking for?” many of the “wilfing” Internauts, irrespective of their age or sex, would conclude that they were looking for “another human being”. Immersed in the instant culture of hasty consumerism and fully subordinated to its rules, they are on a quest for a person with whom to bond and, thereby, to fulfill the urgent need for reciprocity, affiliation and human kindness. This is the essential drive behind the dazzling popularity of social networks. Their search, nonetheless, frequently fails to produce satisfying outcomes, because their contact with “another human being” is electronically “mediated”—by the computer, the tablet, the mobile phone. As such, it is not a face-to-face relation, which, despite the ubiquity and attractions of mediated communication, continues to be an object of desire occupying top positions in people’s priority lists—a humanistically underpinned and inimitably appealing value.

Searching for another human being in the post-modern world, an individual realizes that the consumer market—ready to meet nearly all needs, including the most sublime ones—rushes to his/her help with an offer

²The literature distinguishes between information and knowledge. The author finds Marc Porat’s formulation most convincing. Cited by Manuel Castells in *The Rise of the Network Society* (Harvard UP, Cambridge, Mass., 1996), Porat defines information as “the data that has been organized and communicated”.

of a “bought friendship”, as Kargulowa (1996) puts it, and refers him/her to multiple counselors. With the proliferation of counselors in consumer culture, individuals encouraged to use their help can choose among tax advisors, financial consultants, vocational counselors, investment consultants, account handlers, legal advisors, school advisors and family counselors, not to mention hosts of counselors in psychological and educational counseling facilities.

The list above represents but a handful of examples, comprising merely a sample of professional guidance and counseling practitioners. As such, it is a fraction of the multitude of people who perform a range of advisory and helping functions, including our kin, neighbors, friends, acquaintances, and also strangers we coincidentally engage with in face-to-face encounters. Their already numerous ranks are augmented by counselors who advise us via various media—the authors of sundry advice publications, self-help handbooks, and “advice columns” available in newspapers and magazines as well as on the Internet, radio and television. Additionally, we are also guided by astrologists, numerologists, fortune-tellers, Tarot diviners, clairvoyants, etc.. Briefly, we are inundated with advice by experts in nearly all spheres of social life, who, likewise, seek counseling themselves. Certainly, it is common knowledge that there are two principal categories of counselors: professional and non-professional ones, with the latter role frequently assumed also by ourselves. All of them, irrespective of all differences, have one characteristic in common. Namely, they are not accountable for the guidance they provide, even though it may prove deleterious to their clients, as the author has already discussed elsewhere (Kargul, 2004).

This does not in the least hinder either the growing popularity of counseling or the increase in the “population” of counselors. Inferably, we could propose another hypothesis, that these outcomes ensue from the joint, mutually reinforcing impact of the cultural change mentioned above, aggressive advertising of counseling services, anomie and authority crisis as well as the dismissal of the book, or the printed word as such, by a significant proportion of consumers of culture. The quest for “another human being” or “a friend” indulged in by helpless people who are dissatisfied by both on-line and off-line life (“being-on/off-the-Web”, so to speak) only enhances the effect. “The buying of friendship”, thus, is not necessarily caused exclusively by the buyer’s cynicism, who in purchasing a counselor, purchases a listener and a friend. The buyer may be prompted by the scarcity of well-wishing people around (Kargulowa, 1996), by the sheer inability to find a trustworthy person to confide in and entrust him/herself to, by there simply being no “human being” within his/her horizon. Scott Lash has aptly observed that in the post-modern world, which makes the “expert-systems” universally accessible, people’s automatic reaction to any disruption is to consult experts. When family relationships become fraught with tension or other intimate bonds collapse, people tend to seek experts’ advice, rather than actually try to probe into intentions, emotions and sentiments behind, for example, the partner’s latest fax message, her sadness or her silence. Lash highlights the deeply distressing fact that our recourse to the expert-systems increasingly tends to be pre-emptive in the first place (Lash, 1994, p. 163).

Investigating guidance provision, counseling researchers observe that irrespective of whether the intervention is executed professionally or non-professionally, one can always distinguish its subject, object, aim, methods, tools, means, course, and measurable effects. The counseling action is situated in a particular social, cultural and natural environment. More incisive analyses identify various meanings and positions of counseling: counseling as enactment of a role, counseling as performance of the counseling profession, and counseling as provision of specialized services. In an optimal situation, the service entails cooperation of the counselor and the counselee, who focus together on the problems of the latter. On other occasions, it may

gravitate towards rivalry, which is the case especially if a person seeks counseling under others' pressure rather than out of his/her own acknowledged need and wish. And on still other occasions, it mutates into a bought friendship, in which the counselee invests in sustaining the contact with the counselor, but does not attempt to use the counselor's help to solve problems or fundamentally change his/her life. In such contexts, the counselee simply seeks to feign change so as to uphold the illusion of him/herself as a "modern" person, for example. The advice-providing counselor, in turn, finds it expedient to listen to the client, to spare him/her any effort, and to ensure his/her comfort and satisfaction by offering ready-made "identity kits", e.g., a macho, a new sensitive man, a business woman, etc., without actually fathoming the counselee's experiences and emotions.

In specifically psychological terms, especially in the wake of the Rogerian turn, counseling tends to be identified with the counselor-counselee relation as such. Frequently, it is even supposed to be "a pure relation" sustained because of and for the sake of pleasure it gives to the partners, who relish being together, supporting each other psychologically, and offering each other understanding, kindness, tolerance, and security in the collaborative problem-solving. The counseling relation entered into, created, and constructed by its participants emerges in a situation which is at the same time discrete and open. It must be discrete enough to be identifiable, separable and distinguishable from other situations; and it must be open enough to "come into being" at all, "to become", to enable its participants to act expressively, to reflect profoundly, to analyze intellectually, and to feel sensitively. This pertains both to situations which materialize in counseling institutions, to situations which occur in genuine, unintentional, unstructured, and incidental circumstances (cf. Siarkiewicz, 2010) as well as to situations which unfold in the virtual world created at the interface with diverse media messages (cf. Zielińska-Pękał, 2007; Zierkiewicz, 2004). Whatever emerges and happens in the counseling situation produced in such a dyad, in the created space of cooperation, is called counseling. And the site where the relationship commences, as well as the time and circumstances in which it develops, constitutes its context.

Understood in this way, counseling is often identified with Buberian dialogue, with emphatic communication and with the transmission of honest, generally positive and reinforcing messages. However, even if we could demonstrate the performative character of the "space" of interactions created in such a conjuncture, delineate their cultural frameworks, attempt to spell out the general formula of "guidance provision/reception in counseling" or distinguish stages in which helping proceeds, all this would be of no avail to us in specifying many other, perhaps more important, dimensions of counseling. We would still be unable to codify the values invested in the counseling situation, the degree to which its participants commit their own resources to it, the nuances abounding in each particular implementation of the general formula, the participants' experiences and, ultimately, the final outcomes of the "guidance provision/reception in counseling". Not only would we fail to codify them, but we would also be unable to comprehensively design them both for an individual and for society, let alone for the whole globe.

Clearly, irrespective of thoroughness and sophistication of counseling researchers' interventions into counseling—and they include theorizations, analyses and resultant proposals for the optimization of counseling practice—the modern Western market-generated human being cannot do without counselors. Homo consultans indeed depends on counselors, regardless of what competencies they possess and what attitudes to the client they embrace. Homo consultans more and more frequently finds him/herself unable to evade "the helping

hand” which “strikes again”, as John Holt wittily and poignantly put it³. At this point, another hypothesis offers itself, that now hardly any sphere of human activity grants an individual a free “space” to be enjoyed and used for truly unrestrained and self-reliant being and participation. Under the media terror, we are all manipulated into believing that we are, without exception, incompetent in particular spheres of our lifeworlds. As a result, we internalize the conviction that we are unable to create our own life paths. Constantly beset with insecurity, confusion and overpowering vulnerability, *homo consultans* seeks, thus, advice and guidance. The underlying motivations are legion. Most frequently people pursue educational and therapeutic goals, which means that they seek to obtain certain knowledge and/or to attain an emotional equilibrium, possibly solving certain technical problem in the process. Nonetheless, if sought with immoderate frequency, advice and guidance prove a counterproductive entrapment: since they can be highly addictive, *homo consultans* risks developing dependency on counselors and the learned helplessness syndrome. S/he falls into the “clutches” of experts, who start to exert power over him/her and appropriate his/her life. Additionally, while providing guidance, counselors themselves are sometimes inclined to pursue their own agendas, striving to satisfy their diverse needs, such as the need for domination or the need to solve their own problems in life, with the counseling situation turning into a psychotherapeutic session for the counselors themselves.

Conclusion

Concluding, and eager to evade charges of one-sidedness, the author must add that the counseling situation is supposed to be a unique performance—a language-based cooperation; a collaboratively accomplished event/fact/process of performative character. Undoubtedly, there are people who enter a relation with the counselor reflectively, and use the knowledge, help, support and understanding obtained from the counselor to re/de/construct their biographies and life visions. They use guidance selectively as a corrective to the trajectories of their biographies.

This optimistic note cannot however prevent further interrogations. It must be ascertained that given the findings and observations discussed above, we need wide-ranging psychological research to verify the hypotheses proposed in the foregoing and to respond to the yet unanswered queries and ambiguities, such as:

How can we shield our identities while seeking counselors’ help?

(When) Can we do without counselors?

Should we protect ourselves against counselors? If not, why? If so, how?

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³ The phrase “The Helping Hand Strikes Again” comes originally from Holt’s “On Help and Helpers”, part of his *Escape from Childhood: The Needs and Rights of Children*, (New York, Ballantine Books, 1974).

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