

Book Review

Elements of Counselling: A Handbook for Counsellors in Southern Africa (revised edition), Joan Schön, Lauren Gower and Victor Kotze. Westhoven: Sophiatown Community Psychological Services, 2010. ISBN 978-0-620-46606-6.

Esther Price
University of the Witwatersrand

In this revised edition of the original handbook, the authors aim to deliver a counselling text that speaks to everyday people, counsellors and practitioners from diverse backgrounds working within the South African context. The book is largely written from a psychoanalytic perspective. However, whilst basic psychoanalytic concepts are applied and utilized at various points in the book, the text remains exceptionally well written and accessible to the wide audience it intends to reach. The psychoanalytic framework, thus, serves to provide a framework for understanding ‘ourselves and others’ from a very human place. To achieve these aims, the authors divide the book up into four core sections. The first three discuss each of the three phases of counselling, while the fourth section discusses specific issues common to the uniquely South African counselling context. The entire text is generally easy to read with appealing illustrations, dialogues and very real case study examples. The authors also include informative ‘Tech boxes’ which generally discuss theory, with very useful ‘Wordpower’ boxes to define important concepts used within the text. Each chapter ends with some reflection questions that are facilitative of reflecting on oneself as a counsellor in light of the material read in the preceding chapter.

The authors and their collaborators do a fine job of choosing topics that appeal to seasoned therapists and beginning counsellors alike. The first chapter of the first section calls readers to reflect on their own journey as a counsellor, while at the same time impressing upon readers the importance of self-awareness in the process of counselling. Using their user-friendly ‘hands on’ approach, the authors facilitate the counsellor’s understanding of how they can use their awareness and understanding of themselves to *listen* to their clients more effectively, and in so doing, how this makes them better able to hear and help their clients. The second chapter discusses the process of counselling on a theoretical level. After defining counselling, the authors discuss the aims of the counselling process, introducing Carl Rogers to the readers. In the final portion of this chapter, some basic skills and terminology are discussed. In the first

two chapters alone, the reader is given a solid foundation on which to build their skills as a counsellor, with a very real and practical approach adopted. In the third chapter, the authors introduce the important issue of 'the frame' with consequent discussions about why boundaries and a containing frame are important and how counsellors could set and enforce them. The authors invite the reader to reflect on boundaries that they struggle to enforce and why they may struggle to do so, thereby reinforcing the importance of self reflexivity in the counselling process. This chapter concludes the first section, leaving the reader self aware yet contained and inspired to read further.

The second section of the book is aptly titled 'The process of counselling'. Chapter 4 begins this section by discussing practical aspects pertaining to the initiation of a counselling relationship. Using the creative 'supervisor/supervisee' dialogue, important issues pertaining to setting up the counselling frame are explored, reflected on and discussed. In this chapter, counselling ethics are introduced and discussed using very accessible language. In addition, pragmatic suggestions are proposed for handling potentially challenging aspects of the first session such as how to set the frame, how to join with the client, make the first phone call, and how to negotiate the ending of the first session. The fifth, sixth and seventh chapters introduce more advanced and applied aspects of skills pertaining to listening, exploring and understanding clients in sessions. The strong psychoanalytic foundation comes through as the reader is introduced to Eric Berne's Child-Parent-Adult model, culminating in the introduction of core psychoanalytic concepts such as transference, countertransference, and projection. The best part of these chapters is the fact that the authors adopt a tone that addresses the question of 'how'. This focus on application comes just as the reader is left wondering how to put theory and skills learned so far to practice. The second section is concluded with Chapters 8 and 9. Chapter 8 provides a pragmatic framework for problem management with a special focus on empowering clients to identify their own problems, while using all skills learned up to this point to support and facilitate. Chapter 9 discusses ways of working through and negotiating the ending of the counselling relationship while discussing difficult feelings that typically arise in anticipation of endings. Very useful and pragmatic suggestions are given about how to recognize and work with those often difficult feelings. At the end of Section 2, the reader has successfully been given a very solid foundation with regards to what to do in sessions with clients, and why.

Section three introduces the next phase of counselling, which relates to the process of reflecting after the counselling session is over. In Chapter 10, the authors discuss important ways of reflecting on sessions through record-keeping and supervision while at the same time discussing *why* reflection is so important. In the next chapter, the authors discuss the importance of continued and ongoing professional development with crucial guidelines about how to develop and take care of oneself as a counsellor.

The final section of the book presents some specific, well-selected topics that typically present themselves in the South African counselling context. HIV/AIDS is covered in Chapter 12. The authors get to the heart of the complexities of working with people living with HIV and AIDS. They bring to the fore some common reactions and emotions to the diagnosis that clients may bring to counselling as well as feelings associated with stigma associated with the condition. The authors provide a very useful framework for talking to clients about their fears and emotions, against the backdrop of all other skills discussed in earlier chapters. What makes this chapter different from other counselling texts that discuss HIV and AIDS is the focus on self-reflection of the counsellor. The counsellor is encouraged to reflect on their own feelings and prejudices about HIV and AIDS before embarking on a counselling relationship with an HIV-positive client. In addition, the authors emphasize the importance of using one's feelings in the counselling session to truly understand some of the complex emotions clients may bring to the counselling space. The authors further provide practical ways of facilitating discussions with clients around topics such as medication, finding support, addressing material needs, finding new meaning to life and how to negotiate endings, especially in clients with poor prognosis. In so doing, the authors effectively bring to the fore some very important issues pertaining to HIV/AIDS counselling. In the next chapter, the authors discuss issues pertaining to sexuality such as child sexual abuse, rape, and problems of sexual identity. These issues are presented in a matter-of-fact, yet sensitive, manner, allowing the counsellor to internalize the same stance when talking about sexual issues with their clients. In addition, the issue of sexual attraction between client and counsellor is addressed, including some very clear guidelines and parameters for the counsellor. Chapter 14 presents an excellent introduction to trauma theory and practice. A solid framework for how to think about, work with and conceptualize trauma is provided, with an emphasis on counsellor self care. The next chapter discusses issues pertaining to bereavement. The Kübler-Ross stages are introduced and discussed. The authors also include a small section introducing the utility of rituals in the healing process post-bereavement.

While they do not aim to discuss the plethora of complexities inherent in bereavement counselling, they raise these issues sufficiently to offer the reader increased awareness of the existence of these issues. The final chapter, Chapter 16, discusses spirituality and religion especially when these issues come up within the counselling context. The authors contextualize and provide very useful conceptual frameworks for understanding religion and spirituality, which gives the reader a point of reference when working with self-identified religious and/or spiritual clients. What makes this chapter especially helpful, once again, is the self-reflective approach the authors use. They offer avenues of reflection, in the here and now, for when clients ask certain personal questions or even advice of the counsellor, for example concerning moral issues (such as abortion). This chapter offers a fantastic framework for the counsellor to use when confronted with these issues, which helps the counsellor clarify their role where spiritual issues are concerned.

Overall, this is an extremely well-written handbook for counsellors. The authors clearly used their extensive experience to come up with a text that speaks to all levels of counsellors and people who work with people needing to be heard. This book is highly recommended as a reference text for everyone who works with people: different people will get different things from this book. Some will be left with incredible self-awareness and generosity of spirit that can only be facilitative of better understanding of others and better interpersonal relationships. Others will be left with curiosity and an increased ability to listen, empathize and understand which can only facilitate their growth into effective counsellors. This book is definitely a worthwhile read.