

Basics of operative counselling

It can be assumed that guidance practitioners are primarily guided by their subjective theories, personality and behavioural models. This is also confirmed by a new international study on the effectiveness of career guidance from the practitioners' perspective (cf. Ertelt, Röser & Bleckmann, 2015, p. 4). It shows that the perception of success is predominantly subjectively oriented, and external objectified measurements or controlling procedures are judged rather negatively.

We see reasons for this subjectivity in the uniqueness of counselling experienced on a daily basis, which, in the view of practitioners, can hardly be realistically depicted by limited and standardised parameters. A decisive advantage of this orientation could be that it protects against de-individualising routines and the application of methods, as well as against restrictions on counselling freedom. "However, this orientation can only lead to an independent professionalism in connection with professional scientific competence [...] and counselling ethical integration, which makes a claim to counselling freedom credible" (Ertelt, Röser & Bleckmann, 2015, p. 8).

A number of earlier studies have already suggested the increasing importance of eclectic approaches in the field of clinical and general counselling through convergence and integration of different theoretical orientations (cf. Corey, 1990, p. 427). For career guidance in particular, it can be assumed that the degree of methodological eclecticism is likely to be even higher in view of different client groups and different concerns in each case, as well as the labour market-related conditions in the various professions and regions. However, the absolute prerequisite for a creative synthesis and systematic eclecticism is a sound knowledge of the most important basic theories that come into question for vocational application (operative approaches) (cf. Ertelt & Schulz, 1997, p. 16).

After decades of dealing with vocational guidance methods in guidance training and practice at national and international levels, we see dangers both from a rigid application of certain theoretical (not necessarily scientifically validated and fashionable) approaches and from relatively arbitrary (recipe-like) models created from different theories, which are sometimes put into practice with organisation-specific commitment. Both cases often reveal a disregard for the experiential knowledge of guidance practitioners. Therefore, a direct dialogue between guidance practice and guidance science on a systematic empirical basis is called for in order to systematically process the "tacit knowledge" (cf. Böhle, 2020, p. 37) or the "subjective theories" in the sense of knowledge management. Even earlier, Lambert (2013, p. 200) was able to prove, based on many years of research, on which factors the success of counselling depends for the client (cf. Ertelt, Schulz & Frey, 2022, p. 115).

The main factors for success (40 %) are on the client's side, namely their talents, strengths/competencies, attitudes and positive social background. Also extremely important is the positive shaping of the relationship between counsellor and client (30 %), which has been demonstrated above all by Carl Rogers and other relationship theorists. This includes, above all, empathy, emotional warmth, respect for the other, authenticity in behaviour and an accepting basic attitude.

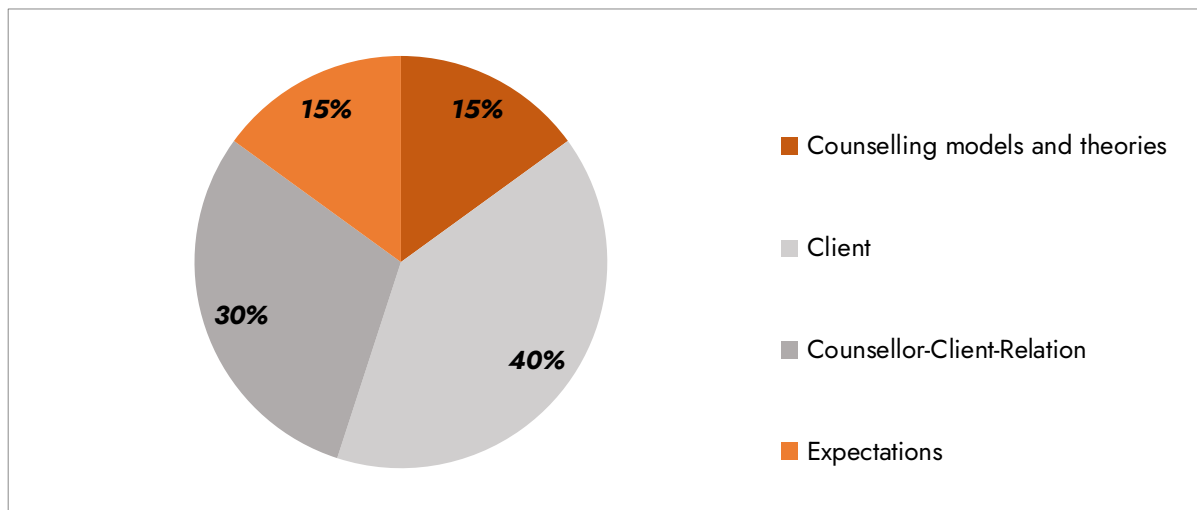


Figure 1: Factors in the success of counselling (Source: Lambert, 2013)

Hopes and expectations regarding positive changes in the current problem situation explain 15 % of the success in guidance. This gives an important indication for the marketing of counselling services, especially in the field of image building. Method-related factors, i.e. the counsellor's theoretical orientation and counselling techniques, are also involved in counselling success to 15 %.

In recent decades, the number of counselling theories, models and methods has increased greatly, but research on effectiveness has not proven any of these approaches or compilation of counselling techniques to be consistently better than others. Rather, it can be stated that the guidance practitioner must respond adequately to the specific constellation and intervening variables in the concrete situation. To do this, however, he or she must have a science-based set of tools at his disposal and be involved in a systematic exchange of experience with professional colleagues and science-guided supervision. For the adequate combination of theories and techniques in career counselling and counselling-supported job placement, their classification according to the following scheme is helpful. The ordinate is defined by the poles of counselling primarily aimed at individual change processes and, on the other hand, problem-solving using expert knowledge on the part of the counsellor.

The abscissa represents the primary focus more on emotional aspects or more on cognitive processes.

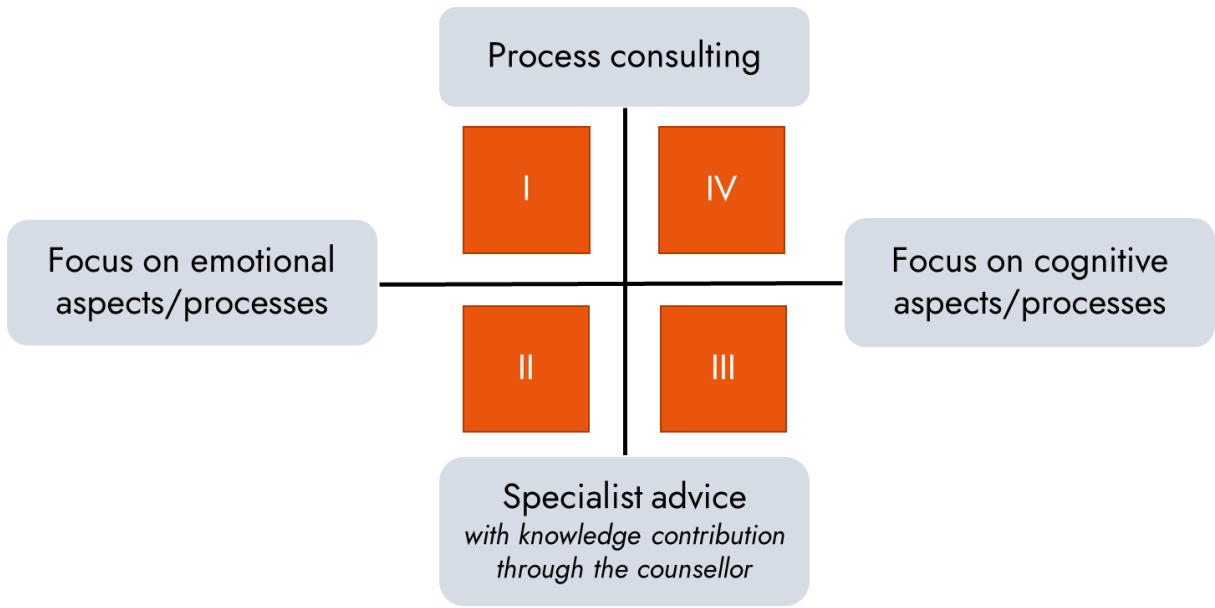


Figure 2: Typology of psychological counselling approaches. Source: Burkhart (1995), in Ertelt/Schulz (1997, p. 12).

In a number of countries, vocational guidance and counselling-supported placement provided by public employment services (PES) in particular has the following characteristics:

Relatively low contact density, high problem pressure among clients (e.g. due to unemployment, financial livelihood security, e.g. in the case of women returning to work or in conversion, compliance with legal requirements as a condition for unemployment benefits) and strong differences in terms of solution-relevant expert knowledge, e.g. about education and training opportunities, occupational knowledge, jobs, funding opportunities. Under these conditions, vocational counselling can be placed in quadrant III, like the trait-and-factor approaches in the tradition of Fr. Parsons and J. Holland. The person-centred approaches in the tradition of Carl Rogers, on the other hand, are found more in quadrant I. Those cognitive-behavioural methods of career counselling that are less based on expert models usually belong to Quadrant IV because they focus strongly on changes through learning processes in the client.

Basic counselling skills

In the following, the internationally common basic skills of counselling and then three selected counselling approaches are characterised – with a special focus on their application in career-related counselling and placement interviews.

In their standard work, "Microcounselling", A. Ivey and J. Authier (1978) had already described the basic skills of counselling in a differentiated way (cf. the German summary by Ertelt & Schulz, 1985). In further publications, Ivey (1982) arranged these so-called "microskills" of counselling in

a hierarchical pyramid, which can also form the basis for counselling training (cf. Ertelt, Schulz & Frey, 2022, p. 24).

The basis is formed by ethnic and multicultural counselling competencies, which are prerequisites for an atmosphere of well-being for the client ("wellness"). These competencies find expression in attentive behaviour ("attending behaviour"), i.e. culturally and individually appropriate eye contact, language behaviour and controlled body language.

The basic skill "**attention**" is of central value for counselling interaction. The counsellor must carefully observe the client's facial expressions (field of vision) and gestures (body movement), as these provide important information about the interlocutor. Observation should be accompanied by changing, natural eye contact (i.e. not rigidly fixating) and relaxed posture on the part of the counsellor.

Specifically, appropriate counsellor attention comprises four qualities (cf. Ivey & Ivey 2007; Ertelt, Schulz & Frey, 2022, p. 32):

- **Visual (eye contact):** Look at the other person when talking.
- **Vocal: The tone of voice,** volume and rate of speech of the counsellor should signal: "I am interested in what you are saying, and we are talking on the same level". Research shows that people who feel superior to the other person tend to speak louder.
- **Pay attention to what the client says:** The counsellor should follow what the client says, not interrupt him arbitrarily or change the subject on his own authority.
- **Body language:** The counsellor should show expressive facial expressions (i.e. not appear bored), not lean forward when listening and look at the client.

It must be pointed out, however, that the ability to pay attention may well show cultural differences. This also applies to the distance in official communication, which is about arm's length in Western-oriented cultures (Europe and North America), while smaller distances are common in other cultural circles. There are also differences in the interpretation of smiles and direct eye contact.

Behaviour also includes silence. Sometimes, it is very helpful for the person seeking advice if the counsellor does not say anything right away and thus signals that he or she is completely there for the other person. However, pauses of silence should not be too long because that makes people feel insecure. Beginners, in particular, tend to either answer too quickly or remain silent for too long (10 to 15 seconds).

It is important to control non-verbal skills such as eye contact, facial expressions and body posture during silence. Basically, a somewhat extended reaction time of the counsellor is recommended with simultaneous minimisation of his/her speaking parts in the preceding counselling phases. It

is important to note that the extension of the counsellor's speaking part carries the risk of reducing the client's participation in communication and even of "escaping" tendencies.

The "minimal encouragement to speak" is intended to prompt the client to continue speaking.

Examples include a simple "hm - hm", repetition of keywords in his remarks, one-word questions, head nodding and inviting gestures. These cues are meant to relate directly to what the client is saying and thus support the process of self-exploration.

The skills of selective attention and directed counselling response include open and closed questions, reflection of feelings, paraphrasing and non-interpretive summarising. These skills are designed to enable the client to express their concerns in their "story" without interference from the counsellor.

Open and closed questions

Function of open questions:

- They help to start a counselling conversation: "What would you like to talk to me about today?"
- They help the client to give detailed explanations of problem areas, setting their own priorities: "Can you tell me more about how you fared in the job interview at the company?"
- In open questions, the very first word can influence the direction of the answer.

What-questions lead to factual statements: "What are your career plans?" They characterise an open discussion situation: "What would be an example for the problem situation described?"

How-questions encourage discussion: "What is your opinion about this?"

Why-questions are directed at justifications for action: "Why do you think this happened?"

- However, questions can also be too numerous or asked incorrectly.
- Especially too many closed questions (i.e. those that only allow one kind of answer) or why-questions put the client on the defensive and signal a strongly hierarchical conversation situation. Some cultures react negatively to too many questions.
- Questions can be used to encourage clients to focus on their strengths by giving positive feedback on their answers.
- Questions to evaluate and guide the counselling conversation. Open questions bind the client to say more; closed questions narrow the focus of the conversation and are used especially in certain phases of the diagnostic process.
- Questions about the course of the discussion, the achievement of objectives and problems that have not yet been adequately dealt with are used for evaluation purposes.

Paraphrase

Paraphrases are clarifying repetitions of what the client has said. They serve to bring clarity to speech that is not entirely clear by reformulating it, focusing on the choice of the person saying it and working out problems through concise statements. Paraphrasing helps both the counsellor and the client to clarify what is being said through selective attention to the objective content. They are, therefore, restatements (without interpretation) of the content, so they are not echoes or simple repetitions but refer to the essence of the client's most recent speech utterances.

Reflection of the feelings

While paraphrasing refers to the content of the client's remarks, reflecting on feelings aims to highlight the client's emotions in the remarks. Here, a close connection between empathy and emotional attention emerges. By reflecting the emotions expressed in the client's statements, they can be bundled, prioritised and fed into a deeper reflection. The characteristics of a good reflection of emotions are:

- Precise naming of the client's emotional state
- Addressing the client directly by mentioning the name or the personal pronoun
- A reference to the "here and now" situation
- Expansion with paraphrased elements of the client's previous statements.

The linguistic form should take into account as much as possible the client's way of receiving information (with reference to the different "channels") (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic).

- Visual: "It looks like you want to say ..."
- Auditory: "It sounds like ..."
- Cinema table: "The situation touches you to such an extent that you ..."

Non-interpretative summary

Fundamental to the summary is the counsellor's ability to reproduce different content-related and emotional elements of the conversation in a content-rich "gestalt" (figure of thought). Summaries can be seen as long paraphrases of the contents and emotions, in which sections of the conversation or entire counselling sessions are recapitulated and characterised in the core elements. Summaries can establish the connection to previous conversations at the beginning. They can secure interim results during counselling, and at the end, they can give a concise overview of what has been achieved as a basis for further action and conversation evaluation.

The skills discussed so far refer mainly to the classic model of client-centred counselling, according to C. Rogers (1961). Here, the focus is entirely on the client in the situation-related communication

of the "here and now". Concreteness of feelings has priority over concretisation of ideas and actions. This style of counselling encourages the client to express himself freely about his feelings and thus to perceive his own strengths in feelings and behaviour.

This approach by C. Rogers still has a great influence on basic competencies in almost all counselling settings. However, it must be clearly stated that it is not sufficient for professional counselling, especially when time, labour market and financial conditions are limiting, expert knowledge is necessary, and the client is under high problem pressure. This draws attention to the skills and strategies of directional and influencing guidance. To this end, Ivey (in Ertelt, Schulz & Frey, 2022, p. 29) proposes a five-stage interview structure:

1. *Establishing a good relationship with the client (1st phase) and structuring with information about the intended effects and the structure of the conversation (2nd phase).*

Particular attention should be paid to multicultural specifics in the first phase because some cultural groups expect a very formal opening of the conversation, others a clear structure and goal setting from the beginning.

2. *Gathering important information*

In this phase, the client is asked to tell their "story" and to explain why they have come for counselling and what exactly their problem is. The counsellor uses the skills of attention and active listening described above - open and closed questions, paraphrasing, reflection of feelings, encouragement to speak and summarising.

3. *Determining counselling goals and results*

The first thing to do here is to clarify what the client's goals are. Especially if he or she expresses himself vaguely or not logically, the counsellor must make a special effort to arrive at a clear idea of the results as a basis for determining the process steps to achieve the goals.

4. *Identify alternatives and point out contradictions.*

The aim here is to help the client generate solutions to the problems and concerns. Useful questions are: "What alternatives do you see?", "What has worked well for you in the past with similar problems?", "Which of these options would you like to try first?", "What are the advantages and disadvantages of this plan of action?"

5. *Generalisation and transfer of the developed problem solution to everyday life.*

Quite often, the most difficult part of counselling is to get the client to adopt innovative ways of solving the problem. And not all clients are ready to transfer the discussed solutions

to their real situation after counselling. This requires preparation during counselling, for example, by changing roles, "homework", and qualified follow-up support ("follow up").

The skills that guide action include 'confronting', 'focusing' and 'reflecting on meaning'.

Confrontation

The term "confrontation" often has a rather negative connotation, which is why some counsellors prefer to speak of "challenge". The first part of confrontation involves paying attention to "mixed messages", inconsistencies and contradictions in the client's statements. Example: A long-term unemployed person says he or she is very eager to get a job, but so far, he or she has shown little or no initiative in looking for a job. The final part of the confrontation involves evaluating to what extent the client acknowledges the contradictions and intends to show corresponding changed activities from them.

Focus

This skill helps the client to make his statements more precise by means of selective perception of certain aspects and to see his problem in a different light. Different focal points of focusing are to be distinguished:

- "Client focus" is meant to help with the exploration of one's own emotions.
- In "counsellor focus", the counsellor conveys to the client via self-revelation that he/she has also had similar problems.
- The "focus on others" aims to encourage the client to look at other points of view ("change of perspective").
- The "Thematic Focus" encourages discussion of a specific topic.
- The "family focus" emphasises the influence of the family in many situations.
- "Cultural/environmental/contextual focus" aims at the client's different attachments and makes them the object of problem-solving.

Reflection on meaning

This skill aims to help the client detect hidden (but determining) feelings and guide them to self-exploration of core values and goals in their life.

Skills to promote individual change

According to Ivey (in Ertelt, Schulz & Frey 2022, p. 111), counselling skills that promote action include:

- a. Change of perspective/reconsideration enables the client to assess their situation or problem from a different point of view. Example: "So far, we have discussed what went wrong in your job interview. Let's now look at what went well in order to build on that."
- b. Logical consequences show the possible consequences that result from a certain action. These consequences can be negative or positive in nature and should be pointed out gently and objectively, thus encouraging a fearful or euphoric evaluation of alternative actions.
- c. Self-revelations show the client that the counsellor can better empathise with the problem through his or her own similar experience. However, these self-revelations should be brief and directly related to the client's experience. Immediately after the self-disclosure, the focus should return to the client.
- d. Feedback from the counsellor is most effective when the client has asked for it. It should be specific, precise, concrete and non-judgmental. Close attention should be paid to the client's reaction.
- e. Information transfer plays a central role, especially in so-called expert counselling. The information should focus on the essentials and not exceed the client's capacity to absorb and process it.
- f. Guidance and directives are elementary building blocks in certain counselling approaches, such as in "solution-oriented brief counselling". These include: Instructions for action, role plays, "hotseat", change of perspective, "homework", meditation exercises, and group work - e.g. job club, systematic desensitisation, and relaxation exercises.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the skills described above are applied in the different approaches to counselling, each in a specific combination and meaning. Those counselling training that recommend and practise the application of these skills without a background in counselling theory are to be judged critically. From our international comparisons, this pre-scientific and thus also counselling-ethically questionable approach is not uncommon, especially since a number of trainers are not sufficiently qualified.

In Readers 10, 11 and 12, we therefore want to deal with three selected guidance approaches that we consider effective for holistic vocational guidance and guidance-based job placement. These are the problem management approach, according to Gerard Egan, solution-oriented counselling and the information structural methodology (ISM), according to Ertelt and Schulz.

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