

Critical Reflection on a Counselling Session

“22nd March 2021 Triad Group C”

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In this reflective essay I provide a critical analysis of my counselling skills during a recorded session conducted in 22nd March 2021 with Sarah. A fellow from Triad Group C.

This evaluation is made up of a summary of the session alongside descriptions of every counselling micro-skills and foundation-skills occurrence. The goal is to produce both a personal reflection of my practise and a theoretical understanding of my professional performance which can leverage my abilities and personal growth. The very main idea of microskills has a big appeal to me. It is like a very differentiate method of rolling out counselling with one best inner self.

McLeod on microskills describe them using Ivey words:

*Within the microskills model, the core skills that underpin all forms of helping are attending skills. These skills encompass eye contact, a warm and interested tone of voice, 'verbal tracking' (willingness to stick with the client's story rather than changing the subject) and appropriate body language (e.g. facing the person, leaning forward, using encouraging gestures). These characteristics are summarized by Ivey et al. (2010) as comprising 'the three Vs + B: visuals, vocals, verbals, and body language'.*ⁱ

(McLeod and McLeod, 2011, pp. 37)

The model I followed for session approach was *The Skilled Helper Model*, by Gerard Egan. First appeared in 2004 (Nelson, 2012)ⁱⁱ which I chose to adopt in its first stage. My decision was made solely based in the likeness of this model with my own natural style and skills. I tried not to be rigid in its application but consistent.

Session duration was 22 min and 49 sec and can be found here:

(<https://web.microsoftstream.com/video/74de9ec9-86d5-4546-b3d5-f2213033e4f7>)

Sarah and me played roles as counsellor and patient who attended first session and willing to share recent events that potentially lead to important changes in her life and her children.

My approach was dissecting the session (see appended table) in frames following natural order of conversation pauses, separating every intervention and then marking every skill appearances; Using this table as a reference. I will be pinpointing every skill with its timing to make the analysis as systematic as possible.

Session description.

(0:50)The first four minutes I spent contracting with Sarah. I invited her in the warmest possible way to engage into the intended therapeutic relationship — I failed not using this word specifically — and explained the boundaries that govern our interaction. I felt really encouraged by her positive response. I mentioned also what confidentiality means regarding counselling sessions and my duty of care and then I am obliged to report any disclosure related to drug abuse, terrorism and physical abuse (ethical imperative). I tried to remark importance of limiting

confidentiality but relaxing her modulating my voice in a calmer manner. She accepted positively. Then I moved onto her power to decide about which topic to address and which not and to stop session when she wants. One of my areas to improve is contracting; I should have mentioned systematically the informed consent components (procedures, risk-benefit, relevant alternatives) as we learn in class presentation from Reiter-Theil diagramⁱⁱⁱ. I mean, I did it, but in my sake of setting our contracting in warm and open manner, I was very succinct when mentioned every part. Ending this section, I expressed her my willingness and availability to listen and understand her – it was demonstrating unconditional positive regard –.

A brief but holistic concept of contracting from Gothard^{iv},

The contract can be defined as ‘a specific commitment from both counsellor and client to a clearly defined course of action’; (Culley 1991). It requires negotiation, is a two-way process and entails the ordering of priorities. Essentially it provides a focus for the work to be subsequently, conducted by both client and counsellor. The scope of the contract can be extensive embracing the number of sessions, their frequency, timing and length.

(Gothard, 1999, pp. 217)

During this section I demonstrated my agreement with body language and facial expressions (smiling, nodding and chuckling). By reflecting now I noticed last trait was not necessary really, or at least not until assess her mood state. (04:16).

I asked her how she felt, and she said “I’m OK” (04:25). She was smiling and then Sarah started doing a count of situation during COVID-19 lockdown season and how this impacted her sentimental relationship with her partner. He related her relation is being affected cause physical separation just when she and her partner were making plans to move and start living together. Intentionally, I started conveying mirroring with body language in different ways in order to build rapport. I nodded and leaned forward as much as camera let me do it whilst was paying close attention to his words, intonation and body language (attending behaviour) (04:55).

Sarah described her feelings as “uncertainty” and “not knowing what’s going on” because lock down situation disrupted their plans of living together and even get married. In an effort to be empathetic, I smiled. Examining closely, I believe that was a bit awkward at that point, so I could have waited to mirror her in accordance with her words (06:01).

I attempted to paraphrase and clarify my understanding about her ideas repeating the word “uncertainty”, and then made an open-ended question: How do you feel about? (uncertainty) (06:48). This was not really a paraphrasing, it sounded like parroting, so I should have used a synonym instead. Therefore, as validating technique worked well in my opinion, since Sarah expressed “a little bit anxious” and “fear of get it wrong” and make a pause – seemingly reflecting –. During which I stayed quietly as well and nodding (positive use of silence)(07:05).

She brought back into saying “I have to think about it” and was hesitant. I was expecting a longer pause and wanting to express her some validation and just about to tell her something, she added “might be fear”, so we clashed (07:37). I must pay more attention and let the silence come to an end from client side. Good lesson to learn. Even though Sarah started to reveal more underlying concerns and feelings, that demonstrated I got rapport then empathy then she felt understood and trusting. I got the insight, for next sessions and clients, of to slow down my mental chattering and put aside assumptions*** that prevent me of deep listening.

The fear Sarah expressed was in her words, related to make “a wrong decision”(07:46). I expressed my solidarity to her (validation) using the expression “I know how you’re feeling” but a better and softer approach could be “I think”(09:13). Wanting to clarify what her fear is related to, I asked her a couple close-ended questions. My intentions were to focus her on her feelings and to know more about her story (09:30).

Sarah, given her answers, was not strange to change or uncertainty but apparently she was ready to settle down with her partner and imaging an easy happy ending. This is comprehensible because she and her ex-partner split years ago and then started a new relationship but none could predict COVID pandemic arrival and its disruptive consequences.

I made a reflective question: “Is the first time you experience these feelings with your partner?” (10:00). I was pondering going a bit more straight to the point, helping her to focus on her feelings motivations rather than the discomfort or anxiety which are signs but not causes. - pursuing questioning skills, rapport and congruence -. She replied “definitely”, so now having kind of reassurance from Sara, we can move forward to explore another areas of possible tension.

After another open-ended question I made, Sarah expressed security about relationship itself; (10:20), stating was the distance that caused anxiety and a sense of guilty because everyone in this relation loves their original places, and he was the one “who got to make sacrifices” (10:50). This answer seemed to me reflect underlying concerns and feelings that possibly masks ‘underground causes’. I remembered moments when myself or clients wanting to express concerns, then they end up saying differently. Many factors involved in doing so or possible incongruence. I consider client’s point of view recalling Carl Rogers “conflict and psychological distress”. Gordon, cite Rogers’:

Rogers (1961), suggests that to enable an individual to resolve these conflicts in therapy the therapist has to provide a relationship characterized by certain facilitative conditions. These will provide an understanding atmosphere which will allow the individual the space to explore and make sense of his/her current experience. These conditions include non-possessive warmth, unconditional positive regard, empathy, a non-judgmental attitude and genuineness Rogers believed that awareness of these conditions on the part of the person would be sufficient to enable change to take place. In this approach the relationship between the therapist and the client is central to the change process;

(Nelson, 2000, pp.7)

I replied validating her: “any relation involve sacrifices” That is a life-learned lesson very important to my personal experience(11:28). Even though, now reflecting on this moment I consider myself possibly making assumptions, if not consciously at least I got a quick conclusion. I recommend myself to slow down and stand on the point of immediacy or keeping listen even more actively.

As she was even more open and brought new reasons to the conversation, like “In the past I felt I made the sacrifices”(11:00) the session was working in her benefit. At this point, I got the impression we were engaged in a healthy therapeutic relationship and my counselling foundation skills were working. She expressed openly and seemed trusting and relaxed even laughing from time to time.

After almost fifteen minutes listening carefully and taking mental notes, I wanted to bring some concreteness to the session, and I was ready to confront Sarah by questioning her about her own thoughts regarding her feelings. I intended to do so through a light self-disclosure by sharing with her some fears–uncertainty cycles I faced and how I felt about. This was not necessary since she made a natural pause whilst (reflecting?) and I made a close-leading question “Did you feel lost?” (12:09). I let some room to silence; Sarah seemed naturally outspoken person and her pauses were quite short. After some seconds she replied with a new element “No, just *then*” that word made me rethink about the timing of her feelings in the present (immediacy) but related to previous experiences. Immediacy and confrontation seemed to me quite important in any therapeutic relationship or any meaningful conversation. My favourite quote about immediacy comes from a fiction novelist Chuck Palahniuk: *“You hear the best stories from ordinary people. That sense of immediacy is more real to me than a lot of writerly, literary-type crafted stories. I want that immediacy when I read a novel”*.

Confrontation through questions worked out by revealing interest points not discussed before. During all these moments I tried to demonstrate my empathy by nodding and leaning forward.

As a personal reflection, I realised how important is to be attentive and demonstrating unconditional regard as a condition to have a client-centered session. The outcome has resulted in building solid foundation for a therapeutic relationship based on trust and mutual understanding.

After a second pause she asked herself “Do I want to root again?” (12:30) and this question lead Sarah to a succession of reflections giving her the chance to drain emotional thoughts and for me improving understanding. An important point to improve in my practice is to have better control of my body language in order to mirror my client efficiently. Use of body language, gestures, manners, traits and so, has a capital importance in human communication and is a challenge for me to dominate this art. Many studies demonstrate humans talks more without words but with body. By reading McLeod^{vi} book “Counselling Skills”, I found a very different yet powerful definition: Bodily Awareness. (bolds are mine)

*It refers to a capacity to make use of information from **non-verbal cues** and the physical presence of both client and counsellor... But these **words are produced by bodies**, and are accompanied by multiple bodily cues...Even minimal experience of any of these activities will make it clear that a great deal of meaning is expressed through body posture and movement, and that the quality of a relationship is conveyed through **an interpersonal 'dance'** that takes place between two people.*

(McLeod and McLeod, 2011, pp. 45)

My role then was to not interrupt that flow, “the dance” of our conversation but most important, her conversation flow with herself and with me. Keeping eye contact and being relaxed I was genuinely involved in comprehend her beyond her words. Particularly, I enjoy much analysing “discourses” and this skill is natural to me alongside having studied it in university. In this session I pay special attention to Sarah’s words and intonation, in sake of better understand her and her context. She continued relating her perceptions about her partner and her own concerns about their relationship. She is keen of avoiding push him or force situations; staying as “we are” (12:33) but having a sort of route (“kinda of clear path” 13:13). I encouraged/validated her feelings as important and a good point to furthering.

To have more information about her story, I formulated a closed question “Have you talked about these feelings with him?” (13:41) My intention was to have a confirmation for if her concerns were about the relationship, her partner or herself and if were different causes for her anxiety. Might I can provoke some discernment of her own (masked?) reasons.

Conversation followed referring about her partner and their well-assorted relationship due they used to talk a lot upon different topics and her feelings; now facing this physical separation, even more forced since they live two hours and a half apart and travelling for just popping in is pointless. Her children are important, and she wishes not to “uproot” them and preserve their stability. At this moment I felt the session was approaching to its climax and rapport was established sufficiently. We were engaged in a back and forth of validating/encouraging traits with empathy. As well, she exhausted different seemed superficial arguments to land in some kind of conclusions or at least organic closure. I questioned Sarah whether if she felt concerned or lost -because she introduced this word minutes ago - . My perception of having attunement was confirmed when Sarah affirmed “none decision has to be permanent, Why I am torturing if is not that bad?”(15:10) and “...but is part of my psyche just playing these things” (16:31)

Now that I noticed relaxation and a almost content attitude, I was ready to used immediacy (16:40) so I invited her to express her current feelings when telling me her concerns. She expressed relieve with word “lighter” and “drained” and “things kinda work out” (17:16). I encouraged her positively to deepen her reflections by having some silence if she wanted. She continued speaking about her partner and her own response in view of changes. And she revealed his doubts about not making right decision and how telling her partner was a surprise for him. (18:51). I decided to make an open-ended question just to probe if anything else could arise – congruence -. Sarah mentioned some episodes what meant changes in her life (divorce, moving home many times) and even referred to be

“excited” about this new change (her partner moving to live with her(20:00) and her attachment with her place (20:39). These new points were relevant and pertinent to her anxiety feelings, so I could not find any incongruence in her story.

With time running off, I took the opportunity to summarize the session by expressing to her thanks for sharing her concerns with me and, remarking her positive attitude under current circumstances and, how facing changes with joy is not a common thing. (21:20). – I tried to reflect back, agreement, clarifying -. She accepted my invitation for having another session, and we said goodbye to close the session.

Overall, I am partially satisfied with my performance in this session relating to micro-skills and foundation skills. Although I believe I have the competences and naturally I am empathic, warm and listener, I feel a sort of “fine-tuning” is necessary to be outstanding. I tend to make many questions to help client out to reflect or challenging, therefore interrupting client’s flow. It happened with Sarah. Even if I am rolling out Person Centred Therapy and all my efforts are focused in listen and engage with client needs, I can critically recognise I must give more chances to silences break up. In different moments I intervened just when client was ready to carry on then we clashed. I was quick to act and let client resume but these clashes could be problematic with some clients.

About my body language, I used to accompanying client’s words and attitude with my own gestures and manners looking for mirror them efficiently; therefore I must improve timing when mirroring because sometimes I found myself mismatching with client mood, specially when they show negative feelings.

A mistake I committed was failed to discover client goals for the session versus my goal of help her to become aware of own motifs or fears. I can assume this fail come from my experience and therefore can be framed like an assumption from my side. Again, I need to better clarify and state contracting systematically beginning the session. Thus providing a scaffolding for therapeutic relationship and possible outcomes. Although I chose to follow Egan first stage of Skilled Helper Model, being critical, I could dig deeper or questioned Sarah about her expectations about session or therapeutic relationship. This thus would let Sarah to clarify her own thoughts.

Ultimately, I am content with my micro-skills and foundation-skills evolvement that was made in this session. I could engage Sarah and gained her trust. I established a therapeutical relationship with her and I got important lessons for future sessions and further development.

One of my favourite books brought to me a powerful quote I want to share to close:

When dealing with people, remember you are not dealing with creatures of logic, but creatures of emotion.

Dale Carnegie, *How To Win Friends And Influence People*

- i McLeod, J. and McLeod, J., 2011. *Counselling Skills: A Practical Guide For Counsellors And Helping Professionals: A practical guide for counsellors and helping professionals*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).
- ii Nelson, P.J.M., 2012. An easy introduction to Egan's skilled helper solution focused counselling approach.
- iii Reiter-Theil, S., Eich, H. and Reiter, L., 1991. Informed consent in family therapy: Necessary discourse and practice.
- iv Gothard, W. P. (1999) 'The Contract and Effective Careers Counselling: A British Perspective', *Journal of Career Development*, 25(3), pp. 217–229. doi: 10.1177/089484539902500305.
- v Gordon, N.S., 2000. Researching psychotherapy, the importance of the client's view: A methodological challenge. *The Qualitative Report*, 4(3), pp.1-20.
- vi McLeod, J. and McLeod, J., 2011. *Counselling Skills: A Practical Guide For Counsellors And Helping Professionals: A practical guide for counsellors and helping professionals*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).

Appendix

Session dissection

Micro Skills

Number 1- Listening. ...

Skill number 2- Empathy. ...

Skill number 3 – Genuineness. ...

Skill number 4- Unconditional Positive Regard. ...

Skill number 5 – Concreteness. ...

Skill number 6- Open Questions. ...

Skill number 7- Counsellor Self-Disclosure.

Sarah	Carlos	To improve	Well done skills demonstrated
	Welcoming - Introduction – boundaries, relationship, confidentiality. (0:50 – 4:16) Are you OK with this?	Make it shorter and include some other points	Warm welcome, contracting explained. Asked about her initial feelings and if she understands what's about our session. Building rapport.
Welcome and time is yours. I am here to listen and understand you.			
Uncertainty, separation from partner due lock down rules separated (4:55)	Hmm, noddling, yep		Mirroring, attending behaviour, active listening, encouraging
Plans for marrying (6:01)	Hmm		Active listening, encouraging
Each one loves their places (06:20) Uncertainty, not knowing what's happening? What's going on?	Nodding,	My body language could be more alike her feelings	Mirroring, attending behaviour, encouraging

	(06:48) Interestingly you said Uncertainty – I try to understand you. Question: When you mention it, How do you feel about? (7:05)	I could use synonyms or different related words to Uncertainty	Paraphrasing, probing question, open-ended question, validating
I feel lost, a little bit anxious... fear of get it wrong (7:37)			She got into reflection
I have to think about it...			Use of silence
Might be...fear (7:46)	Well	I interrupted in middle of a phrase. Could discourage conversation.	
Fear of make decisions at some point. Not knowing how decision is gonna be. Wrong decision? Makes me feel anxious (8:27)		Mirroring?	
	I noticed you express anxiety and not being sure (8:39) Hesitating	Avoid hesitations or giving impression of doubting	Paraphrasing, clarifying
	I know how you understand (9:13)	I can use softer validation by choosing words like “I believe” or asking questions to clarify	Empathy, validation
	These feelings are a new thing for you? Have you experienced this anxiety/uncertainty before? (9:30)		Questioning, focusing, 2)Close-ended question
No, I lived uncertainty. I am familiar with.		I interrupted again	Reflexive questioning
	OK. But, Is it the first time you experience these feelings with		Paraphrasing, Closed-ended question

	your partner? Am I right.		
Definitely	And, Could it be due your partner or is the distance? What provoke these feelings? (10:16)	Wrong mirroring, she was worried, I smiled	Questioning, focusing, Open-ended question
It's the distance really, not insecurity about relationship			Noodling, empathy
I feel guilty cause he's preparing to move here but I know he loves his place. Someone got to make sacrifices (10:50)	Yeah.		Empathy, attending behaviour, encouraging
You know... is that fair, I think. cause In the past I felt I made the sacrifices (11:00)	Mm, mm	Too much movement.	Validation, attending behaviour, encouraging
In the past I moved with my ex-husband. Now he lives in a place completely different. -Laughs- actually	Yeah. Laughs		Empathy, engagement, validation, encouraging
	Any relation involves sacrifices to working out things (11:28)		Paraphrasing,
	Did you say you feel like lost? (12:09)		Clarification, paraphrasing, reflection
Uh m, No, just then.	Go on		Attending behaviour, encouraging,
In the past I moved followed my ex partner, Now I feel relatively settle here now. (12:24)	nodding		Mirroring, attending behaviour, encouraging
Do I want to root again? I don't know. (12:30)			silence
I don't wanna force him, you know (12:33) We wanna continue			Silence, mirroring, attending behaviour

as we are.			
2 hours apart to pop in. is a long way			
	Off course, it is!		Validation, attending behaviour, empathy, encouraging
It's not a thing to think at all but it plays with on mind (13:08)	nodding		Mirroring, empathy, attending behaviour
Do you like (having) kinda of a clear path (13:13)			
	Well, I think your concerns are valid. You have a point (13:25) If you are expressing it is because you feel important		Empathy, clarification, validation, genuineness
	Have you talked about these feelings with him? (13:41)		Questioning, reflecting, probing question, close-ended question (?)
Yes, a lot even last night	It's good to know, It is positive		Empathy,
We do, we talk a lot when it comes out (13:59) He's feeling he probably moves here	yeah		Mirroring, attending behaviour, encouraging
	I'm asking, cause just say I don't want to force.... My feelings are you are worried but not lost, concerned but using your experience. (14:07)	I broke up, I should let her speak more	Empathy, validation, clarification, confrontation, focusing, summarising
	Do you feel concerned? (15:00)		Questioning, clarification, focusing
About my own, his feelings, right decision. None decision has to be	ahh...		Mirroring, attending behaviour, encouraging

permanent. Why am I torturing is not that bad? -laughing- (15:10)			
We up to few years to be in position to up to live together. We have children living with us. We don't want to uproot them. (15:50)	Yahh...		Empathy, attending behaviour, encouraging
We have plenty of time knowing. We're gonna live in Wales. We can live somewhere else. (16:00)			
I know objectively nothing is fixed (16:16) but is part of my psyche just playing this things "Oh we can make this decision, both we can be happy with that , that's it, both can live happily ever after" (16:31) -laughing -	Yeah, of course, Of course, yeah, - Laughs - , I think is natural, you're right, you are right on that thing		Advanced Listening, attending behaviour, encouraging
	Just now, thinking on this moment (16:40) How do you feel when you're expressing to me that (things)?	A soft transition could be made. I just jumped off to different direction.	Immediacy, Open-ended questions,
Just speaking, just then, I feel a little bit lighter, this know, things kinda work out... kinda feels drained just thinking about that as well. (17:16)			
	OK, it's good to know, I mean. You started positively, cause if in any moment you feel bad about sharing, not because you, me (but) because the same		Summarizing, rapport,

	feeling you have experienced, it is fine to say “stop”, You know? (17:33)		
Uh... yeah	To have a break or something		empathy
	Another thing that come to my attention... it is, Do you have any insight idea about how he feels about that? (22:47) your concern is shared? Or is a thing just hitting you?		Immediacy, empathy, focusing, open-ended question,
I think, he feels same as me really, you know, it's quite good cause we both are quite similar in the way we think about things (18:14) you know, what do you think future hold for us? You know, is bothering him as well cause I am really attached where I live and you are attached where you live (18:32)	Nodding,		Validating feelings, mirroring
And I think... initially (18:38) when first got together, the feeling was I would move, I will got that... but over time I expressed to him I'm not 100% sure actually that was I want to do (18:51) that was surprising for him	Nodding, yep		Validating
Cause he's , he doesn't mind changes particularly (19:02)			
You know his mind is what I must			

gonna be			
	And what about you and changes? (19:15)		Reflection, challenging, questioning, open-ended question, focusing
Well I had a lot of changes cause I moved quite a lot. (laughs)...My marriage broke down and experienced many jobs as well. Changes part of my life, quite excited about that, I don't know.. (pause) (20:00) I takes me by surprise actually.	Nodding		Validating
When I first moved here I hated it, you know.. (laughs) really. It was my game plan we would move after my marriage broke down , I'm gonna stay here because my kids cause I didn't want to pull them out of school (20:19) wanting stability for them	Sighs, laughs – Of course, yeah		Empathy, validation,
Assuming eventually I go back to Leeds where I am from. Where my family is (20:23)			
Um.. Uh... (Pause) If I'm honest, I'm more attached this place (20:39) after got together with my partner.	Oh woo! I will keep that words for next sessions cause attachment is natural no necessarily bad		Mirroring, summarising,
	We are short of time, I'd like to express thanks for sharing but as well a positive outcome you have a really good attitude cause you enjoy changes and		Closing, reflection of meaning.

	challenges, not anyone likes. Keep for yourself that positive attitude.		
Chuckles -	Thanks for sharing, Thank you really. Would you like to have another session? (21:48)		Invited to engage and assessing client's response
I would, yes. Thank you.	Me too, cause I got really nice insight from you and different things to discuss about. You expressed clean and simple but really profound cause you are evoking and looking back (22:04) and mentioned children, husband, whole life being impacted for this decisions. (22:26)	Too much movement, distracts.	Reflecting back, Validating feelings, arriving at agreement, clarifying, summarizing
Yeah. Laugh, yes	Thank you Sarah for sharing. For Now we're closing, see you next week. (22:38)		Mirroring