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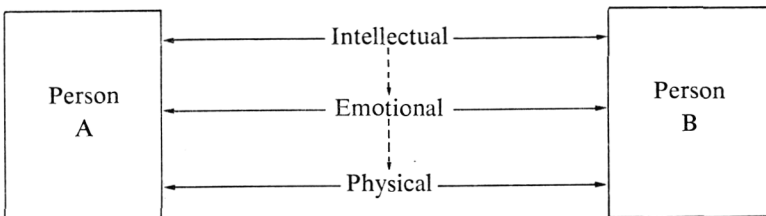
HUMAN INTIMACY, AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT IN COUNSELLING

Most of us know very little about human intimacy. I suppose this is because few of us really experience it to any significant extent. These two statements are probably startling to some readers, annoying to others, and yet very much in line with the thoughts and feelings of others. All of us need to experience human intimacy because we exist in a state of aloneness; we become aware of this state from time to time through our feelings of loneliness, however vague or clear cut they may be. And it's amazing how many ways we try to overcome these feelings; at times we are temporarily successful yet our state of aloneness persists.

The title of this brief article may be disturbing to some because of a tendency to equate *human* intimacy with *physical* intimacy. In this sense perhaps the term is somewhat "loaded." But to think of human intimacy in such narrow terms is to remove most of its meaning—meaning that is so deeply imbedded in the dimensions of a significant human relationship. An adequate description of human intimacy is no easier to formulate than a description of the qualitative aspects of human emotions. I wish I could just point to the experience of intimacy as I have known it and say "there it is," rather than attempt to describe it, knowing full well that my limited vocabulary cannot possibly capture its essence in any clear or complete way. Perhaps it can be known only in *experience*, not in ambiguous and meaning-limited words. All I can do here is *talk about* the experience and some of the dimensions which it seems to have for me, and leave the reader to experience it in his own human contacts.

As I think about the relationship which can exist between any two human beings I am aware of at least three dimensions. These are the dimensions of the intellectual, the emotional, and the physical. They can be shown pictorially as indicated in Figure I.

FIGURE I
 DIMENSIONS OF A HUMAN RELATIONSHIP



It occurs to me that in normal social contact we tend to progress from the intellectual to the emotional and to some extent to the physical. Our society places strong emphasis upon the first of these, the intellectual aspects of relationships—on the capacity of persons to communicate ideas and thoughts to each other verbally. Many of us have the impression that verbal communication encompasses almost the whole of communication. In so doing we ignore the large non-verbal components inherent in attitudes, feelings, gestures, and such like. Perhaps it is not surprising that we operate this way in that we are strongly rewarded for intellectual communication in our educational systems and in day-to-day social contacts. Furthermore it is the expected and encouraged mode of communication in such professional endeavors as teaching, law, and even to some extent in counselling and psychotherapy.

Many of us trained in counselling or clinical psychology were taught to place almost exclusive emphasis upon the intellectual dimension of relationships with our clients. Many of us learned that we should not become “emotionally involved,” and no mention was made at all of physical relationships with clients. Presumably the latter were considered to be entirely inappropriate. With reference to the emotional dimension let me state that I no longer find the question of whether or not one should become emotionally involved with his client to be a meaningful question. It seems to me any *meaningful* human relationship, including a counselling relationship, has an emotional component. I would therefore assert that if a counsellor is not emotionally involved with his client to some extent then he is probably not being genuinely helpful to him. The meaningful issue to me, as I see it now, relates to the *type of emotional involvement* which is genuinely facilitative of growth in the client, and, it should be remembered, in the counsellor as well, and the type of emotional involvement which is non-facilitative or actually obstructive to growth. I do not believe any generalizations can be drawn on this issue, but rather think that the nature of a facilitative emotional involvement will vary from client to client, from counsellor to counsellor, and with the nature of the concerns being discussed. Many writers have noted that perhaps the most growth-producing element in counselling is the extent to which the counsellor or therapist cares about his client as a person, and is able to communicate this caring in a genuine and non-possessive way. It may be that the emotional component of the relationship is really the most significant component in helping the client to move himself forward in meaningful directions. I very much agree with writers who point out that in some sense counselling is much more *being* than *doing*; the client is helped more by the counsellor as a *person*, than he is by techniques, information, or problem solutions communicated to him verbally by the counsellor. In an existential sense, the most fundamental task of the counsellor may be to help the client to have the “courage to become” what he is capable of becoming.

A dimension of the relationship rarely talked about in counselling is that of the physical. Here I am referring not only to body contact but also to such things as eye contact and physical proximity. In the past, the counsellor who made sure that he didn't get emotionally involved with his client also made sure that he kept rather far away physically as well. The easiest way to do this was to place the client on the opposite side of the desk which

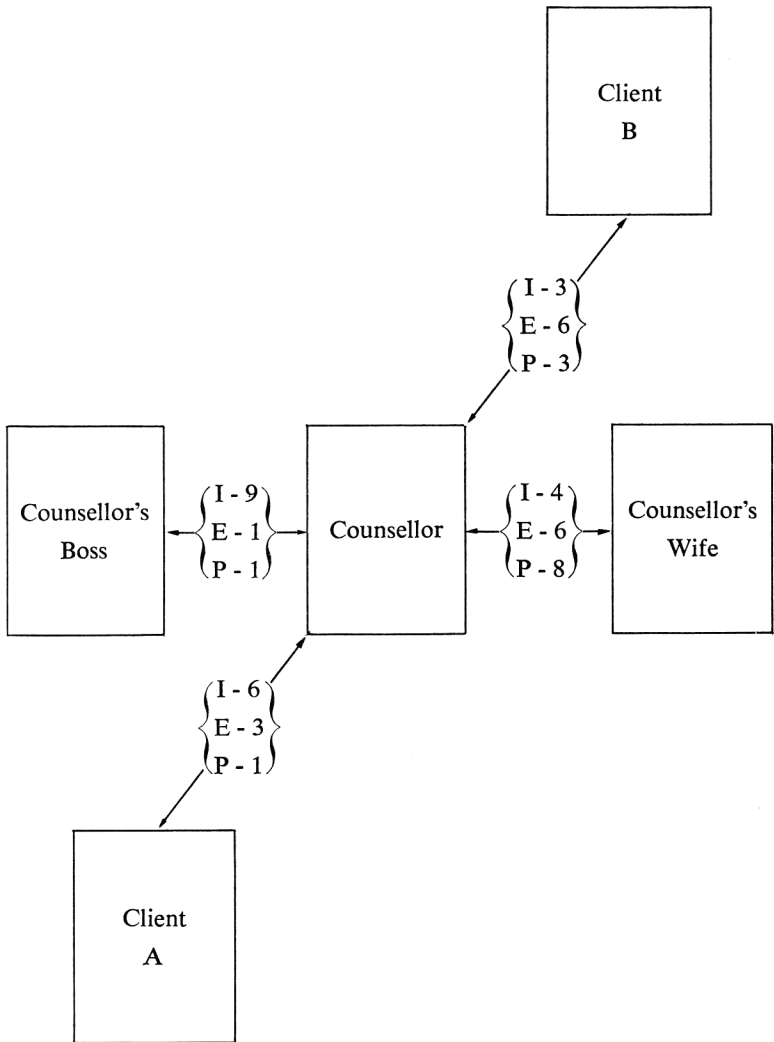
guaranteed a certain physical distance. As I see it, the potential of appropriate physical contact in the counselling relationship is an almost totally unexplored area. It seems likely that physical contact will always, and maybe always should, be a relatively minor part of the counselling relationship, yet its significance may be real and should not be underestimated. I believe there are some things which can be communicated physically which cannot be communicated verbally, or in other non-verbal ways. For example, a hand on the shoulder at an appropriate time may communicate reassurance when verbal communication would be inadequate or even inappropriate. I hope that we counsellors and counsellor educators will give a lot of thought to this dimension of our relationships with our clients and will be less reserved in discussing it openly in the future than we have in the past.

I can see particular importance of the physical dimension in work with children. Recently I saw a small boy of about seven years of age who found it extremely difficult to communicate verbally with either his social worker or other adults. I immediately engaged him in working with puzzles and worked right along with him, sitting in close proximity to him. Gradually through becoming used to each other physically and by placing my hand on his shoulder or slapping him on the back, I hope appropriately, he came to develop a closer emotional relationship with me and later began to open up and talk about his problems and needs. As noted above, our usual progression is from the intellectual through the emotional to the physical. In this case the progression was exactly the reverse.

Let me carry my speculations about the dimensions of human relationships a little further. Let me suppose that each of the three dimensions I have mentioned can exist with weights varying from zero, or virtually no emphasis upon the dimension, to a high of ten, or maximum involvement on the dimension. I suggest that during the first interview with a client most counsellors tend to emphasize the intellectual dimension and minimize the emotional and physical dimensions. The code for this relationship might then be, say 9-1-1. The nine refers to the high rating on the intellectual dimension and the ones refer to ratings on the emotional and physical dimensions. It seems to me that if the relationship develops into a truly helping relationship then these ratings will change, with increasing emphasis upon the emotional dimension and some increase on the physical dimension and decrease on the intellectual dimension. If the concerns are personal and involved, then perhaps by the tenth interview the relationship might become a 5-5-2 relationship. I very much doubt that it will ever be possible to specify optimal weights on these dimensions for counselling relationships as I suspect that the weights will vary with the counsellor, the client, the nature of the concerns, the number of prior counselling sessions, and perhaps a hundred or more other variables. I would make bold to state, however, that if a counsellor continues to maintain a 9-1-1 relationship with his client he is probably not facilitating maximum growth. In some cases, for example, he may well be attempting to treat an emotional concern primarily through the dimension of intellectual contact. This might be somewhat analogous to a situation in medicine in which an ulcer is treated by purely medical means.

The counsellor as a person finds himself relating to a whole host of people, not just to his clients. The relative weights on the three dimensions

FIGURE II
VARYING WEIGHTS OF DIFFERENT RELATIONSHIPS



specified will likely vary considerably from person to person as suggested in Figure II.

I should emphasize that these are not fixed weightings; they are constantly in a process of change. Very likely too the relative weights in one relationship are affected by the weights in another relationship. For example, if the counsellor has a satisfying (growth producing) relationship with his wife and family, he may well be better able to develop a truly facilitative relationship with more of his clients. This is just a hunch but serves, I hope, to illustrate the point I'm trying to make. All kinds of other complexities immediately present themselves. For example, can one really specify the nature of a relationship between two people in terms of a single set of weights, or does one have to rely on the *perceptions* each has of the relationship, and hence derive two sets of weights? For example, a prostitute might see her relationship with her "client" as a 0-0-10 relationship whereas the partner may see the relationship as a 1-2-8 relationship! It's not my purpose here to work through such problems; my only concern is to stimulate thought about what I believe to be the central importance in counselling of the *counselling relationship*.

I would like to suggest further that the counsellor does not understand his client or promote his growth in any complete sense until he has come to experience a "comfortable" and "growth facilitative" level of contact with him on each of the three dimensions. This takes time and is possible only if the counsellor genuinely sees his client as a person to be valued and allows himself to be known to his client. I am convinced from my own clinical experiences that I must allow myself to be known, and not adopt an "expert" orientation, which serves only to wall me off from my clients. The counsellor who allows himself to be known will find that the client will reveal himself much more readily. And in this process of becoming open and trusting of the other, both the client and the counsellor grow. The counsellor need not be reluctant to recognize the growth which comes to him as a person through counselling. This aspect of counselling has been badly neglected in the past. At times the attitude has been that counselling is purely a one-way process, or *should be*. Of course, this is simply not the case.

It will be obvious that my point of view places central importance on the quality of the relationship existing between the counsellor and the client. I find myself coming to reject the distinction we make between "counsellor" and "client." I am beginning to see these words as labels attached to people which may, in themselves, only aid in the process of keeping people apart. I feel it is more fruitful to think of the counsellor and client as simply two people with *different experiences* and at different stages in their own personal development who meet to focus primary attention upon the concerns of the one person, commonly referred to as the client. My point of view also maintains the central importance of a *positive involvement* by the counsellor in the life and experiences of his client. He is involved with him intellectually, emotionally, and to some extent physically. I am convinced the involvement on each of these dimensions contributes to growth; for any one counsellor, and any one client at any one time there is an optimal level on each of these dimensions which will lead to maximal growth.

I feel that many of us have been afraid of human intimacy in the past

and hence haven't allowed ourselves to experience it. I think Carl Rogers is right when he points out that perhaps one reason for the professionalization of many occupations is that it enables people to remain aloof from each other. I hope we can counteract this tendency to avoid close human contact in counselling and can set ourselves to work at the task of exploring more fully and more creatively the power of human relationships.

DE L'INTIMITE EN COUNSELLING

DONALD C. FAIR

Toutes les relations humaines, le counselling inclus, comportent trois grandes dimensions: l'intellectuel, l'émotionnel et le physique.

Les communications les plus susceptibles de porter fruit sont celles où l'on accorde le plus d'importance à ces trois dimensions dont la valeur pourra varier selon les personnes et les circonstances. Souvent les conseillers d'orientation ont tendance à travailler au niveau intellectuel et négligent quelque peu les facteurs émotionnels et physiques. Le but du counselling étant d'amener le client à développer toute sa personne ne serait-ce pas la qualité émotionnelle de la relation qui devrait être mise en valeur? Un contact physique limité et approprié peut aussi contribuer au succès. Les conseillers d'orientation et les éducateurs devraient de toute nécessité utiliser cette force de l'intimité en relation avec les trois dimensions déjà citées pour favoriser l'épanouissement de leurs clients.