Christian school counselling: Towards conceptualising a distinctive paradigm

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Abstract

This article proposes there are inherent core understandings in the words 'Christian' and 'school' that make this type of counselling different. The writer argues for a Christian distinctive through a critical challenge put to contemporary psychology and in reviewing 1 John 3:24-4:8. The unique character of school counselling is represented by two frameworks. These examine the direction of the counselling process and the interaction between the social ecology and the interpersonal relationship patterns of school life, from a student perspective.

Introduction

Is suicide OK? A scenario: The scene is not uncommon in a school setting. A teenager, probably between fourteen and seventeen, is sitting with an adult who has a counselling role. The youngster shares that they have been experimenting with taking large doses of readily available pain killers. Looking up at the counsellor with a hint of sadness, they ask: "Is it OK to suicide?" What should the counsellor do?

Below are some options:

a. offer support to the teenager;
b. ask an open-ended reflective question, such as, "How does this make you feel?"
c. sit respectfully and silently to see what comes next;
d. structure the next set of questions to establish what happened recently in their life;
e. review the family history for any patterns of depression;
f. help the teenager consider their options about the most peaceful way to suicide, if they were determined to do so;
g. quickly go through a check-list of questions to assess the probable risk of their attempting or completing suicide;
h. refer them to a physician to check for iron deficiency and / or hormonal instability;
i. open the Bible and teach about the sanctity of life;
j. offer to pray to seek God's guidance for them;
k. a combination of the above (in what order?);
l. something else (e.g. referral to a specialist).

Which foundations? Does faith matter?

The writer once put the above scenario to a group of psychology lecturers from different faculties at the same university. The topic under discussion was the role of faith (and Christianity) within psychology. Most of the lecturers held to the view that science—which they interpreted as naturalistic or empiricist science, was the only valid basis for psychology as a 'mature' discipline. So the group, including the founding professor, was asked what research evidence should inform their choice of an option, particularly option (f). Subsequently, the seminar became highly animated and, of significance, no individual could confidently provide an answer within an empiricist framework, nor was there a group consensus.

What can help counsellors decide in this situation? Should they actively move to dissuade someone from committing suicide, or simply ensure that the counselee, having considered all options, is well supported in whatever they decide? This example may seem dramatic, but the same ethical dilemma applies in principle to many other counselling scenarios. These might range from considering sexual preferences or activity and reacting to parent / teacher discipline, to recreational pursuits involving health risks (extreme sport, alcohol and other drug ab/use, etc.); responding to peers; and the level of academic performance at school.

Preference-utilitarian ethicists, such as Professor Peter Singer would claim the choices relating to the above scenario do not matter, as long as the individual does not hurt another. But from where has that caveat even come? And how is 'hurting another' defined? The point is, any counselling that claims

> *If counselling involves 'soul care', Christian counsellors need to think through how their core faith informs their practice*

to be based on 'objective science' is functioning at a level of relationship that is less than human. It is pretence to assert counsellors should be 'amoral' in their work, i.e. giving help with no reference to a set of ethics that transcends the situation under consideration. G.K. Chesterton made a pertinent observation:

> Once people stop believing in God, the problem is *not* that they will believe nothing; rather the problem is that they will believe anything.[1]

In contrast to an amoral stance, a Christian counsellor may want to pursue deeply the interface between counselling and theology. An internet search focussed on that interface will reveal many topical books, articles and valuable resources, for those interested in detailed discussion.[2] Moreover, this writer contends if counselling indeed involves what Clinton and Ohlschlager[3] refer to as 'soul work' (or 'soul care'), then those engaged in it who consider themselves Christian, need to think through individually how their core faith informs their practice—i.e. how will they determine what is right and wrong in the face of ethical dilemmas? A reading of the canon of Christian Scripture would certainly expect it. In addition, Church history demonstrates what happens when doctrine and experience are separated.[4] In the counselling context, both theology and history warn us that doctrine (or ethics) without responsiveness results in harsh moralism, while responsiveness without faith-based ethics leads to emotionalised permissiveness.

Marty Lloyd-Jones[5] comments on this assertion and finds support in 1 John 3:24-4:8. The passage recognises that to be a Christian involves experience: "We know it by the Spirit he gave us" (1 John 3:24; NIV). However, there is also a recognition that some experiences can be misleading, and must be tested: "…do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits …" (1 John 4:1; NIV).

Cognitive or behavioural psychologists might point out that this is a very early example of thinking that interacts with behaviour. However, this does not account for the inherently ethical nature of human life as mentioned above. Such cognitive or behavioural explanations are even more critically flawed if based on a theory of social evolution that tries to account for human ethical behaviour in terms of 'natural selection'; particularly the human behaviour of self-sacrifice.[6]

John, the apostle, demonstrates a deeper understanding of the human psyche. He declares that the balance between experience and correctness is grounded in certain acceptances or denials about the historical structure of life. Has Jesus Christ come in the flesh or not?[7] He further declares that the ultimate test of individual maturity with reference to this historical event is how we

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relate to others: "Whoever does not love does not know God …" (1 John 4:8; NIV).

Which direction? Two proposed frameworks

The greatest challenge to Christian belief, according to Lloyd-Jones, is not complete denial of Christ, but *misrepresentations* of Christ.[8] A Christian counsellor thus needs a framework that affirms the centrality of acknowledging Christ as the deepest meaning of human existence.[9] While some secular frameworks may have something to offer, this is an important starting point that assists in evaluating whether counselling approaches take a biblical view of life and human behaviour. Lloyd-Jones comments on our human tendency to take that which should be complementary, and push it to extremes:

> And thus when the whole emphasis is placed upon one or the other, you have either a tendency to fanaticism and excesses, or a tendency toward barren intellectualism and a mechanical and a dead kind of orthodoxy.[10]

If this notion is applied to the ethical underpinnings of the counselling situation, then one of three relational directions is being enacted each time a counsellor helps someone. There is:

1. a commitment to 'soul care', that assists someone to attain a deeper understanding of knowing and experiencing God's love, and of loving others, which means:

   > … seeing people's pain as a soul wound as well as a psychological disorder, at times. It means being invested in others—a caring connection with someone—rather than merely engaging in skilled talking … We value more the impact of the character and maturity of the counsellor than what is done in terms of technique.[11]

2. an examination of behaviour through an individualised experience analysis that moves someone towards a relationship mode of personal selectivity (favouritism);
3. an exploration of thinking through a pragmatic framework to enhance someone's relational self-control.

It is recognised life is not lived in discrete segments and elements of all three may 'slide' in and out of any helping situation.

The above options are diagrammatically represented in Figure 1. Also, it should be noted that this representation of the core challenge from 1 John does not deal with the implications of personal gifting or style, in terms of the communication processes during the discernment of the heart-state issues within counselling.

One could consider which schools of counselling theory fit in such a schema. For example, one may argue that person-centred theory captures much of

Figure 1: Control, politics, or love?
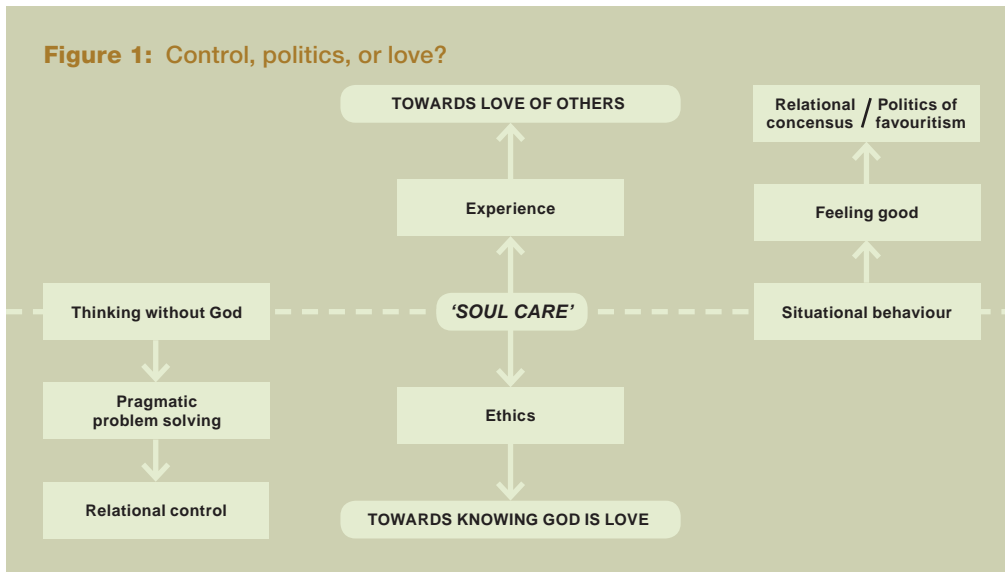
the 'feeling good' aspects of counselling. Rational-emotive therapy would illustrate much of the 'thinking only' side of 'soul care'. In this sense, each may be perceived as having a 'kernel of truth'.

'Soul care' does entail understanding one's emotional experiences; it also entails understanding the thought processes of a person.

However, if either of these theories or methodologies is divorced from the overall direction of the counselling (God-loyal 'soul care'), then they run the risk of misrepresenting Christ, who enables the knowledge that God is love, and love of the other. It is not being advocated that Jesus Christ should verbally be 'preached' in each counselling contact. What *is* being suggested through the challenge of 1 John and scriptures such as Matthew 22:38-40, is the *direction* that any counselling takes: towards self-gratification, control of others, or love? Both experience and ethics are needed to discern this.

A school context

The principles outlined above could refer to any counselling setting. Does the *school* setting make a difference, or can it? Surprisingly, the question is rarely considered in counselling literature. One example is a special edition of the Australian Psychological Society's professional newsletter that looked at the role of the psychologist in schools.[12] This professional publication highlighted *individual* counsellors doing *remedial* psychological work with *individual* students, but there was a striking lack of consideration of the school as a community, or of opportunities for different levels of intervention along the lines of Caplan's primary, secondary and tertiary model.[13] Is this a credible conception of the place we call 'school'? Is the impact and extent of the efforts of Christian counsellors, interested in 'soul care',

being limited if they stay within such circumscribed parameters?

It is suggested, a different conceptualisation of 'school' can open up other ways of helping students understand their experiences and gain confidence in developing a personal knowledge of 'right and wrong', in a context of Christ-love.
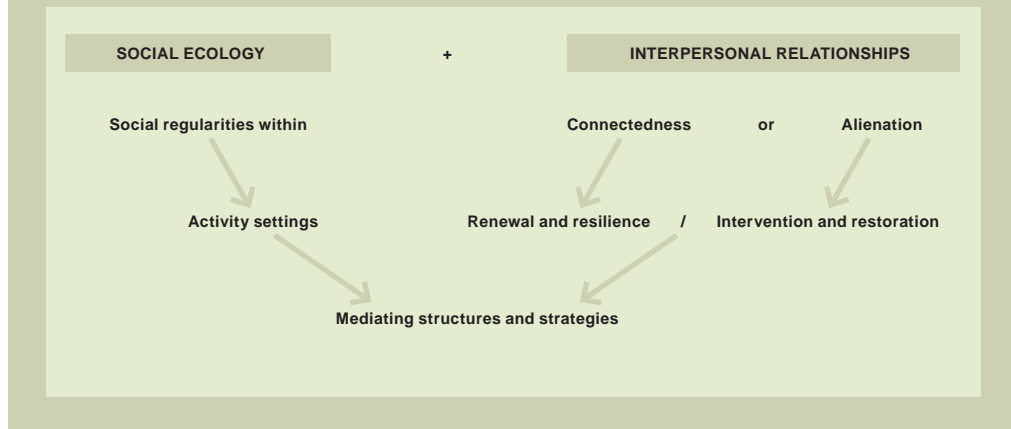
Patterns of life

For many decades, much of the 'art form' of counselling has been seen in the ability of the counsellor to listen to the 'heart of the situation'; and then finding descriptive words to help students have hope to move forward.[14] In this sense, counselling is discursive in mode, phenomenological in context, and analytical in the way that suggestions are made. Ultimately the counsellor is looking to describe a pattern for the person-in-relationship to their life-world, and to open up the possibility of other life-world person-in-relationship patterns.

Such a task is often restricted to focusing either on the person, tending toward a framework of individualism, or focussing on the life-world, and tending toward a framework of collectivism. Contemporary psychology also leans towards a deficit model in both modes; with deficit individualism tending towards a 'mental ill-health' model of conceptualisation and intervention, and deficit collectivism towards a model of 'blaming the other'.

Figure 2 represents attempts to regain some balance within this tension. The student's life-world is represented by a dynamic 'social ecology' that creates the context for inter-personal relationships. The 'social ecology' of that life-world is represented by the patterns of daily life (their social regularities) that are prescribed within social structures, and over which students have limited influence (their activity

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Figure 2: The life-world of the student

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settings). An example of this is the highly prescribed activity settings of the school timetable. Students have little control over times of movement, rest, work, teacher and subject, until the senior years, when students have some choice regarding the last two—subject and teacher. Students' everyday patterns of relationship (social regularities) can thus be highly prescribed within the classroom, and to a lesser extent (but still real), in the playground.

Within their interpersonal relationships, students can demonstrate degrees of connectedness or alienation. Understanding the former assists in helping the student to grow through renewal and in strengthening their resilience.[15] However, understanding relationships that are alienating for students, highlights points where intervention and restoration are required.

Sergiovanni perceptively describes the interpersonal relationship patterns for students in terms of the tendency to connectedness or alienation.[16] Disconnected (or alienated) students tend to compensate by acting out or withdrawing. Well-connected students, on the other hand, go through more systematic growth patterns of commitment.[17]

The Figure 2 framework suggests that a counsellor can review the life-world of the student much more comprehensively if they consider how both the social ecology and the interpersonal patterns impact the possibility of utilising mediating structures and strategies. For example, the counsellor can review the impact of the student's subject timetable, the enforced relationships within and without the classroom, and the patterns of friendships that help or hinder 'soul growth'. The framework also provides a more effective means of thinking about different ways that a counsellor can relate to, and assist a student. The normal practice

of seeing the student only in the counsellor's office, removed from a real-life context, can be complemented by connections in the playground, corridors, or classrooms. This may occur in the presence of other adults such as teachers, pastoral care staff, and senior decision makers; it may also involve other students, or partners in the school community.

Thus a much broader base of resilience enhancing and restoration strategies should be utilised, and identification of alienating structures and patterns identified. Both can be critical aides in understanding the movement to or away from receiving and giving love.

Suicide revisited

Does the distinctive of being Christian, and of reviewing the context of school more fully, have any real impact in considering the scenario presented at the start of this article—of a teenager contemplating suicide? Let us briefly revisit some of the response options to see how these understandings may help:

a. Offer (and give) support

Jesus gave warm visible affirmation to many in need that He met. Paul encourages the Christians in Rome to rejoice and also mourn with others.[18] Thus there is biblical admonition for demonstrating the love of God, this way. Yet, what if there is constraint or a prohibition within the social and legal setting (a school policy; current child protection policy)?

Furthermore, some young persons feel alienated even by an affirming pat on the shoulder (a form of physical affirmation that is professionally inappropriate).

This brings us to the issue of discernment. We need to know what is permissible, and what is constructive.[19] Whatever decision is made, *broadly*

considering the setting can help; such as finding a 'safer' person to comfort the one in distress.

b. The reflective question

The same principles apply as for (a) above. It is important to know the 'heart' of the student and the context in which one finds them to know whether this action would be provocative or helpful. In terms of 'soul care' towards love, the Figure 1 framework also reminds us to consider the direction of the questioning. Is it towards relationship control, emotional politics, or love?

c. The other options

All of these, except option (f), can be considered in a similar way. The frameworks can help answer these critical questions:

1. What is the moral direction of 'soul care' that is being undertaken in reviewing the thinking and experiences of the individual?
2. Does the knowledge of the daily school life (the social ecology) of the student open up possibilities for engaging more than the individual counsellor in facilitating renewal or restorative support for the student?
3. Does an awareness of the levels of connectedness *and* alienation (the interpersonal relationship patterns) open up more possibilities for assisting in the growth towards love in their interpersonal relationships?

d. Option (f)

This option is not sustainable in the Figure 1 framework, if one wants to act in the 'centre stream'. Assisting suicide is sustainable only as an ultimate controlling mechanism, or as an ultimate escape feeling mechanism. It is, literally, a death-knell to any hope of building more loving relationships.

Conclusion - the difference sustained?

If these two frameworks are accepted as a way of conceptualising Christian school counselling, what difference will it make over time? That will depend on whether the counsellor's 'heart' is turned toward love, approval, or control; and whether the counsellor can think of action taking place outside the 'black box' of their counselling office. As a result, responses to the suicide scenario may take on a more:

*   positive understanding that avoids fear or disrespect;
*   perceptive reaction to the needs of the heart; and
*   hopeful outlook based not merely on the counsellor's support, but also on the school community.

Finally, an exhortation from Una Collins points us in the right direction:

> Let us continue to visit the experience, engage in conversation, and, especially, listen to the most vulnerable members, and we shall continue to re-define and wonder.[20] **TEACH**ᴿ

Endnotes

[1] G.K. Chesterton quoted in Clinton, T. & Ohlschlager, G. (2002). *Competent Christian counselling.* Colorado Springs: American Association of Christian Counsellors; see also Hare, J. (2002). *Why bother being good? The place of God in a moral life.* Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

[2] Noteworthy examples over three decades include: Vitz, P. (1977). *Psychology as religion: The cult of self-worship.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carter, J. D. & Narramore, B. (1979). *The integration of psychology and theology.* Grand Rapids: Academie Books; Crabb, L. (1993). *Finding God.* Grand Rapids: Zondervan; Johnson, E. L. & Jones, S.L. (2000). *Psychology and Christianity: Four views.* Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press; Bridger, F. & Atkinson, D. (2002). *Counselling in context: Developing a theological framework.* London: Harper Collins; Clinton, T. & Ohlschlager, G. (2002). *Competent Christian counselling.* Colorado Springs: American Association of Christian Counsellors; Dueck, A. & Lee, C. (2005). *Why psychology needs theology: A radical reformation perspective.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Puffer, K. A. (2007). Essential biblical assumptions about human nature: A modest proposal. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity, 26*(2), 45-56; Tate, Y. B. & Parker, S. (2007). Using Erikson's developmental theory to understand and nurture spiritual development in Christians. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity, 26*(3), 218-226.

[3] Clinton & Ohlschlager, p.34.

[4] Stark, R. (1997). *The rise of Christianity.* San Francisco: Harper Collins; also Stark, R. (2005). *The victory of reason: How Christianity led to freedom, capitalism, and western success.* New York: Random House.

[5] Lloyd-Jones, M. (1994). *The love of God: Studies in 1 John.* Wheaton: Crossway Books.

[6] See O'Hear, A. (2002). *Beyond evolution: Human nature and the limits of evolutionary explanation.* London: Oxford Clarendon Press; also Machuga, R. (2002). *In defence of the soul: What it means to be human.* Grand Rapids: Brazo Press.

[7] See 1 John 4:2-3.

[8] Lloyd-Jones, p.29.

[9] See Colossians 1:15-17.

[10] Lloyd-Jones, p.15.

[11] Ibid, p.31.

[12] See the 2007 issue of *InPsych, 29*(4).

[13] Caplan, G. (1964). *Principles of preventive psychiatry.* New York: Basic Books.

[14] May, R. (1967). *The art of counselling: A practical guide—with case studies and demonstrations.* Nashville: Abingdon.

[15] See Romans 12:1-2

[16] Sergiovanni, T. J. (1994). *Building community in schools.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

[17] Fowler, J. W. (1984). *Becoming adult, becoming Christian: Adult development and Christian faith.* San Francisco: Harper & Row.

[18] See Romans 12:15.

[19] See 1 Corinthians10:23.

[20] Una Collins in Collins, U. M. & McNiff, J. (1999). *Rethinking pastoral care.* London: Routledge, p.42.