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The Role of Attentive Behaviour in Counseling People of African Ancestry

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Abstract:

Since time immemorial, counseling has been provided in Africa, albeit not on a professional level. The legion of problems affecting adults and adolescents in this twenty first century need intervention of competent counselors. The elders, the aunts, and uncles among others used to play this important role, resulting in the care of psychosocial problems affecting the close knit society. Counseling people of African descent has its peculiar considerations which are going to form the backbone of this article. While we celebrate diversity, it is critical to realize that being culturally sensitive to the minute cultural variations among various nationalities becomes crucial to effective counseling. The inner emotional state of an individual is communicated through his or her body. Individuals pass on messages through kinesthetics, the intonation of one's voice, facial expressions, posture, gestures and eye contact which are more authentic in showing emotions than the verbal messages. This article is going to trace the non verbal cues that a counselor of people of African descent needs to be aware of if effective counseling is to take place.

Keywords: Role, Attentive behaviour

1. Introduction

Rupande and Tapfumanezi (2013) argued that professional counseling is a relatively new professional discipline in Africa. However, counseling services have traditionally been provided albeit by non professionals. Traditional counselors in Africa have always been elderly or mature close relations such as Uncles, Aunts and close family friends (Sahwira). The social standing of the preferred traditional counselors varies from country to country. However, the underlying criteria remained that of a trusted confidant who was capable of assisting individuals with their personal problems. The traditional counseling set up was sufficient and suitable for the past closely knit rural communities of Africa. It is critical to realize that counseling in Africa was and is not normally done under formal conditions of the Eurocentric chair and table setup but rather it is more often carried out under informal conditions. Many African people have their own natural help seeking support networks and activities. Within their everyday surroundings, African people counsel each other in church, communities, beauty shops, sitting side-by-side in cars, buses, or trains. African people are able to sit, listen, and learn about how another individual may have dealt with a presenting problem for instance, relationships, children, and finances. People of African ancestry are people who originate in Africa. These people may have dispersed in other parts of the world but their roots can still be traced back to Africa. These people despite the different socialization they may be exposed to have a common thread of attentive behaviour which they show and it is the focus of this paper to discuss these attentive behaviour displayed by people of African Ancestry in a counseling session.

2. Counseling

Maunganidze and Chigwedere (2000) defined counseling as a process used to help people achieve greater levels of self-awareness and to actualize latent potential. It is also a process employed to relieve symptoms of emotional or behavioral dysfunction or distress. Cormier and Hackney,(1993), pointed out that counseling involves an interpersonal relationship between someone actively seeking help and someone willing to give help and is trained to give help in a setting that permits that help to be given and received. What is evident in these definitions is that counseling addresses personal issues and normally requires a clinical approach. Counseling basically involves responding to the feelings, thoughts and actions of the client. It also involves accepting the client's perceptions and is very much anchored in issues of confidentiality and privacy.

In Zimbabwe, like many other African countries, counselors are often found in every village being an elderly man or woman who has gathered wisdom over the years of his or her life. Among the Shona speaking, for instance a counselor is known as chipangamazano (the one who gives advice, ideas and solutions). Chakuchichi and Zvaiva (2010) pointed out that it was then possible for people with problems to visit such counselors and tell them their problems. Parents used to send their adolescent children to such counselors or advisers to be given information about growing up and marriage practices and expectations

Attentive behaviour falls under the mode of non verbal communication and is sometimes called body language because one communicates without uttering a single word. The language uses body movements, touch, physical appearance, including adornment. Non-verbal communication gives the receiver more information about the other person because non-verbal communication behavior is controlled less consciously than verbal behavior. Active listening is an important feature of the African conversation environment and forms an integral part of attentive behaviour.

In reality, non-verbal communication either reinforces or contradicts an individual's verbal communication. For example, if a counselor says to a client, 'I would be willing to listen to anything you want to share while sitting at the edge of his/her chair'. This action contradicts the verbal communication message because the non-verbal message indicates that the counselor does not have the time for the client. And the client is likely to believe the counselor's non-verbal communication than the verbal communication. Non-verbal communication is usually difficult to interpret, so the observer cannot always be sure of the feelings, thoughts and ideas expressed none verbally. The other problem associated with non-verbal communication is that at times the same feeling can be expressed in many ways. For example, in many cultures including that of Zimbabwe, anger may be communicated by aggressive or excessive body movement, or by extreme stillness. In Shona culture, a smile may be used to conceal anger. Non-verbal communication, though very informative, may be difficult to interpret. Chakuchichi and Zvaiva (2010) suggest that to interpret non-verbal behavior, the counselor requires validation with the client. Validation here means confirmation. The client should confirm his or her observations and interpretation of his/her non-verbal behavior. Non-verbal communication involves the client's overall physical appearance which includes all the client's physical characteristics and dressing. It also involves specific parts of the body such as the eyes, skin, hand and arm, the head, the tone of the voice, rate of speech and many others (Gibson and Mitchell 1990).

3. The Concept of Keeping Time in People of African Ancestry

Long discussions are also linked to the concept of African time, as well as the tendency of not keeping rigidly to meeting times. In traditional Africa the usage of Western times arm watches and time clocks is normally not adhered to. People would rise at the first sight of daylight and work until the day is done. Africans, regarding time consciousness, exercise tolerance with regards to tight timetables. When it comes to keeping appointments this aspect of failing to keep to the time scheduled may be interpreted as a sign of not attaching importance to the issue being discussed or signs of resistance according to Freud's psychoanalysis theory. The counselor needs to understand this aspect of people of African ancestry about time so that he or she does not give a wrong interpretation in a counseling session. It is important to note that in African culture; not keeping time may be a sign of seniority. In other words the elderly are not culturally expected to adhere to tight time schedules as is the case with the younger people. If a client who is old and has a position in the society has booked for a counseling session with the counselor, his or her possible lateness must be interpreted with caution, not to be regarded as a sign of resistance. The implications to counseling is that there are no strict time frame adhered since the client may want to talk and discuss his or her problem until he or she is satisfied that justice has been done to it.

4. Use of Minimal Encouragers

Chakuchichi and Zvaiva (2010) argued that the use of minimal encouragers like ummm is also employed by the people of African ancestry to show that they are paying attention to what is being said. The use of these minimal encouragers is employed by both the person who is being counseled and the person who is providing the counseling. It is crucial to realize that once again the counselor or cannot be very sure of what the listener means by the minimal encouragers until the counselor confirms what the listener mean by the minimal encouragers.

5. Eye Contact

According to the Systemic Family Therapy module of (2001), the aspect of looking a dignified person in the eyes when he or she is speaking in people of African ancestry may be regarded as a sign of disrespect. People like chiefs, headman or kings are not supposed to be looked in the eyes when the subject is speaking with them. This gesture however is merely a sign of respect. In other cultures, failure to look the speaker in the eyes may be regarded as a sign of not paying attention to what the speaker is saying or not being interested in what the speaker is discussing. In Western countries avoiding eye contact may also be viewed as a sign of deceitfulness. Eye contact especially among people of European origin is expected whenever communication is being done. People of African ancestry may look down as a sign of respect or as a sign of being embarrassed so the counselor once again needs to get confirmation of what the looking down mean from the client. In a counseling session, people of African ancestry may look down as a sign of respecting the counselor and this may be wrongly interpreted as a sign of not paying attention.

6. Facial Expressions among the African People

Facial expressions provide a lot of information about whom and what the client is. Feelings of joy, sadness, fear, surprise, anger and disgust can be conveyed by facial expressions (Gibson and Mitchell 1990). Counselors need to be aware that clients are quick to notice their facial expressions particularly when they feel uncomfortable. Cross-cultural studies in psychology of facial expressions suggest that they generally convey universal meaning. According to Gibson and Mitchell (1990), mutual eye contact conveys some of these meanings, that is acknowledges recognition of the other person and willingness to maintain communication. Smiling and laughing are very basic behavioural elements of the daily Ubuntu lifestyle of people of African ancestry. The advantage of a smile is that it has a reflective type of response, if you smile at strangers they usually will smile in return. A smile breaks cold atmospheres and stressful situations. It reflects compassion and absence of animosity. It is also important to realize that the above interpretations could

sometimes not be applicable since people can as well smile when they actually mean the opposite to what is generally meant by the smile. At times the counselor must discern whether the smile is genuine or it is actually a fake smile. The above scenario places a heavy burden on the counselor in terms of trying to interpret the smile correctly and calls for a lot of experience on the part of the counselor.

7. Intonation or Pitch of the Voice

It is a feature of Ubuntu people of African ancestry to listen actively to the problems and words of others. The way and manner in which words are expressed are also indicative of the mood of a human being. Words can be spoken rapidly and harshly indicating that someone may be very angry or they may be spoken softly indicating that the speaker is very emotional and has been deeply affected by the subject in question. It is critical at this moment to realize that the counselor can never be absolutely sure that what he or she is interpreting is correct because this intonation will always need confirmation as to what they really mean from the speaker. Speaking softly may be taken to provide a variety of meanings such as being very emotional, fear, or the individual is very hungry such that it is becoming very taxing to him or her to speak loudly. The counselor need to make a confirmation with the client whose intonation may be suggesting any emotional inclination. High pitches are usually associated with anger or even elation about an issue.

8. Posture

Posture and gait refer to the way people walk and carry themselves and are often reliable indicators of self concept, mood and health. In some cultures, erect sitting posture suggests that the individual is paying attention. Slouched posture may indicate dejection or lack of paying attention. Egbochuku (2008) opined that posture reveals the degree of interest we have in the client. The same author pointed out that when we sit back, away from the other, we display an attitude of distancing ourselves; and when we lean towards them we engage and show interest. Similarly, when we cross our arms and legs we convey the message that we are in some way protecting ourselves by closing off. In contrast, a relaxed and attentive posture tells the client that we are comfortable with ourselves and with them in the helping process. Egan (1990), pointed out that counselors need to clarify the meaning of the observed behavior by describing to the client what they see and asking what it means so that they are sure of their interpretation. Once again the counselors need to be very experienced so as to be able to pick these attentive behaviours and be able to interpret them correctly.

9. Hands

Hands, like faces, communicate feelings most of the times. A candidate worried about his examination performance may have trembling fingers. Hands may also communicate by touch, for example, caressing a woman's back communicates sexual feelings. Hands are often involved in gestures, for example hand shake, victory sign, the wave good-bye and many others. The client in a counseling session may bite his or her finger nails and this could mean that the individual is restless or anxious. Once again the ambiguity of the attentive behaviour may come to the fore. Fidgeting may also show that the individual is not settled or is not comfortable. The counselor needs to state what he or she is observing to the client for confirmation, before proceeding with the counseling.

10. Head Movement

Generally, people of African Ancestry nod to show that they are paying attention and the nodding could signify understanding with the issue being discussed or it may be that the individual is in agreement with what is being discussed (Maunganidze, and Chigwedere, 2002). It should be born in mind that these meanings given above can only be known to be the case after confirmation with the person whom the counselor is communicating with. The multiplicity of meanings from this attentive behaviour may lead to the counselor giving a wrong interpretation of the attentive behaviour and as a result this may lead in the counselor not being effective. Moving the head from side to side may show that the individual is not in agreement with what is being discussed or it may signify that the individual is surprised, or is feeling pity for what would have taken place. Misinterpretation of the action may be done by the counselor but it should be born in mind that these attentive behaviours are also very important as they show evidence of the fact that the people involved are paying attention.

11. Distance as a Way to Show Attentive Behaviour

Gibson and Mitchell (1990), also suggest that both client and counselor communicate non-verbally using distance. You can move away when the other moves towards you indicating that you need personal space and move towards when the other moves away indicating your need for closeness. Clients may also show who and what they are by the position in a room. Some clients want to protect themselves from the counselor and sit behind tables or desks, some sit at the centre of the room and others sit side by side with the counselor.

Non-verbal cue	Signs of attentive behaviour	Signs of not paying attention
1. Facial expression	Smiling, interested	disinterested
2. Posture	Leaning forward	Leaning away
3. Gesture	Open, welcoming	Closed, guarding oneself
4. Spatial distance	close	Distant

Table 1: Examples of cues of paying attention or not paying attention

Attentive behavior also gives the counselor an opportunity to employ and use other counseling techniques for example if the client say everything is good but starts to cry it will enable the counselor to use other counseling techniques such as probing to find the source of the distress. People of African ancestry do not usually divulge what is causing problems in their homes so they may come with an upfront agenda which is totally different from the hidden agenda which is causing problems in the home. Problems which are of sexual nature are not easily divulged by people of African ancestry. It is the cultural norm that people of African ancestry are taught not to divulge what is taking place in the home (Kufukura hapwa). However it is critical to realize that still the counselor can only make verification to what he or she is observing but cannot be certain as to what is causing the crying until he or she has verified with the client. The crying could be as a result of so many things so this also shows the ambiguity and various interpretations that could result from a single non verbal behavior. Non verbal attentive behavior cannot be taken with finality. If the counselor is stuck in the session, attentive behavior can bail him or her out by commenting on the non verbal attentive behavior of the client whilst he or she is recovering from being stuck.

12. Conclusion

Attentive behaviour was fully explained in this article and the writer explored the use of non verbal communication cues and how the counselor is supposed to make use of such cues in the counseling of clients. It is critical to note that when counseling is being carried out that the aspect of culture has to be noted since people of different nationalities have certain peculiar ways of behaving which has a direct implication to counseling.

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