

## **PART 1: A Brief Outline of SocioDynamic Counselling: A Co-Constructivist Perspective on Helping**

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**Website:** [www.sociodynamic-constructivist-counselling.com](http://www.sociodynamic-constructivist-counselling.com)

What is SocioDynamic Counselling? It is a post-industrial counselling approach comprised of three elements:

- a) A perspective on post-industrial, contemporary social life and on the social construction of self in contemporary society,
- b) A philosophy of helping, and
- c) A set of counselling practices based on a and b.

What is a practical definition of SocioDynamic Counselling?

SocioDynamic Counselling is defined as a general method of life planning. It is suitable for use with youth and adults. It includes both individual and group counselling procedures. It is a culture-centred approach, incorporating constructivist, socio-cultural, and literary-narrative concepts.

Three interrelated purposes of SocioDynamic Counselling are:

- 1) To assist individuals develop capacities that enable them to progress toward goals of their own choosing, [principle of personal freedom]
- 2) To help individuals become more eligible for successful participation in social life, [principle of agency and empowerment] and
- 3) To support individuals in their search for, and construction of, meaning [principle of meaning-making].

How does SocioDynamic Counselling compare with Conventional Counselling models?

No claim is made that SocioDynamic Counselling is more effective than other counselling models, since it is assumed that all counselling models have some value for some persons in some contexts.

Instead, the position is taken that: "Here are some new ideas and practices, and some old ones, presented in new ways. Try them. You may find them valuable in your own practice. You are your own method. In the end, it is up to you, in concert with those you help, to decide which counselling ideas and practices are most ameliorative in the context of your helping practice". As far as possible, SocioDynamic Counselling is constructed from concepts and observations that are emerging from societies in transformation.

### What are distinctive characteristics of SocioDynamic Counselling?

- It is a self-creating model (in contrast with interventionist models).
- It is culture-centered; the concept of 'cultural tools' is prominent in the practice of SocioDynamic Counselling.
- Instead of a professional vocabulary, counsellors are encouraged to use everyday speech and culturally sensible communication.
- The SocioDynamic philosophy of helping emphasizes a vocabulary of possibility and potential—not a vocabulary of deficiency and psychopathology.
- The SocioDynamic perspective spans several disciplines: constructivism, narrative theory, pragmatic philosophy, literary theory, pedagogy, sociology, psychology, and socio-cultural theory. It is not eclectic. Instead, concepts from various disciplines are assembled into mutual relations, forming a whole.
- SocioDynamic Counselling is a co-constructivist approach providing space for both counsellor and help-seeker to make important contributions to the counselling activity. Both helper and help-seeker are considered experts. The help-seeker is an undisputed expert on her own life experience. No one can know another's life in all the detail that the person whose life it is knows it. The helper is an expert on establishing a communication ambience within which genuinely helpful discussions can take place.
- Typically, the helper brings a variety of problem-solving models to the counselling discussion—models which the help seeker may not possess. However, these models must be adjusted to the needs of the individual and her specific existential situation. In other words, they must make "cultural sense"—problem solving is best thought of as a *bricolage* in which the most preferred decision or plan of action is fashioned from the materials at hand.
- SocioDynamic Counselling is a holistic, integrative approach, actively resisting fragmentation of personal existence and resisting classification of individuals into expert-designed classifications and diagnoses.
- The SocioDynamic perspective uses 'literary' models to describe the self and to provide devices for understanding the self, relationships and the meaning of action. Some examples of literary models are *narrative, narrated self, autobiographical self, authored life, co-authoring, story, voice, scenario, scripts, metaphors, figurative language, and multiple drafts or versions* of the

self. Any culturally meaningful activity can serve as a source of knowledge about human life, mind, and action as well as culture. The SocioDynamic Perspective recognizes a fruitful alliance between psychological/cultural understanding and the humanities, especially literature and art. The life-as-authoring approach is based on the pioneering work of the Russian philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin. This approach is extremely instructive in grasping the co-constructed nature of the self.

- From a SocioDynamic perspective, the self is emergent, evolving, voiced/narrated and socially constructed through symbolic means[in contrast with the psychometric view of self as a set of fixed variables located in neurophysiology]. The ‘self as identity project’, constructed by symbolic-linguistic means is an important concern in SocioDynamic counselling.
- SocioDynamic Counselling is designed to aid self-creation processes such as development of capacities, extension of self-knowledge, authoring and re-authoring of self, and making oneself eligible to participate in society.
- The core values of SocioDynamic Counselling are care, respect, creativity, hope and responsibility.

Respect: The most primary value is respect: respect for other persons, cultural differences, relationships and for self. It means respect for the efforts of individuals to seek answers to the question: “How should I live my life”? More generally, it means respect for the interconnectedness of all living creatures and their environments, and thus respect for acts of both personal and social responsibility.

Creativity: Creativity is often downplayed as impractical, not efficient, and even a waste of time. The SocioDynamic Perspective, in contrast, places great value on creativity. First, the self is held to be an expression of creativity—the self-creation model. Second, it is by using creativity that many obstacles are overcome. Creativity enables the overcoming of limitations and paralyzing habits. In the counselling process itself, counsellor and help-seeker often create solutions, futures, choices, and pathways through their joint and spontaneous work together.

Care: The most fundamental meaning of care is that it matters to the counsellor that the other person has a dilemma or trouble and wishes to find firmer ground upon which to stand. An attitude of care contains the ethical demand that to help another who is in need is a “good”. Conversely, to turn away, dismiss, or remain indifferent to the other who asks for help is irresponsible, and a failure to meet the most human condition—interpersonal trust.

Responsibility: There are two orders of responsibility—personal and social. Personal responsibility refers to the individual’s willingness and ability to assume responsibility for her own thoughts, feelings and actions and to refrain from blaming, justifying, and denying. Social responsibility refers to the

responsibility that one has toward other people, especially those in need of help. Social responsibility is directly linked to care, trust, and to human interconnectedness.

Hope. Hope is regarded as a window to the future. Absence of hope is far more worrisome than the absence of skill or knowledge. A complete loss of hope indicates the removal of reasons for living.

- SocioDynamic counselling is not primarily directed toward adjusting the behaviour of people. It is a meaning-making process. It is designed to help people plan and reorganize their life activities so that their chances are better of achieving the goals that they value. It is a process for inspiring people to lift themselves beyond passivity, beyond the “down-trodden”, “average” and the “typical”. It tries to mobilize both intelligence and creativity in the individual, so that she or he can produce acceptable answers to the questions: “How should I live my life?” and “What do I do next?”

### Why is the term “help-seeker” used in preference to “client”?

The term “client”, although almost universally used in counselling and therapy, has a number of undesirable connotations. The word “client” is derived from the Latin *clinare*, which means to bend, incline, and ‘lean on’. Over time, “client” has accumulated various meanings. Many of these historical meanings are undesirable or even degrading. They include 1) plebe, 2) vassal, 3) one who is under the protection of another—and often having to perform services in order to keep that protection, 4) having someone to lean on, 5) dependent, 6) one who is indebted or obligated to a patron or benefactor, 7) customer, 8) one who seeks the advice of others, 9) one who asks for professional services, including social services. Nearly all of these meanings imply weakness or low status. “Customer” is associated with the economic imperative to turn everything into a commodity and to evaluate in economic terms.

The term “help seeker”, on the other hand, does not carry so many undesirable implications. Furthermore, “help seeker,” describes what the person is doing—seeking help.

### Is SocioDynamic Counselling a form of psychotherapy?

No. Although SocioDynamic Counsellors may work in partnership with medical and psychotherapeutic practitioners, SocioDynamic Counselling is distinctly different from both practices. People who come to counselling typically are not seeking cures for anything. Instead they have practical, concrete, personal concerns and difficulties which they wish to resolve through learning, reorganized life plans and activities, getting new ideas and insights, or initiating actions that are more useful.

Individuals who receive counselling often find life to be more enjoyable and successful as a result of receiving counselling. They may describe their experiences as “therapeutic”, but the goal of counselling is to promote learning, not to cure or treat. SocioDynamic Counselling is not a weak version of therapy. The purpose of this method of counselling is not to “cure” or remedy personality disorders or

pathologies. SocioDynamic Counselling is a distinctive socio-cultural practice organized around the central concepts of life planning and self-identity.

### What capacities are used by SocioDynamically-oriented Counsellors?

- Self-observation. This is a critical capacity in SocioDynamic Counselling. Only by observing, and developing knowledge of, one's own reactions, feelings, biases, assumptions and "stocks of knowledge" is it possible to relate to others in an open and lucid manner. The place of "objectivity" in SocioDynamic Counselling is to become objective toward oneself, and to remain subjective (open, personally attentive, caring) toward others. A counsellor who models self-observation is, de facto, providing conditions for help seekers to learn how to self-observe.
- Cultural literacy. The term, 'cultural literacy, refers to the capacity to use three modes of communication – speech, writing and visualization—for the purpose of making and negotiating meaning effectively within culturally defined situations. It is up to the counsellor to construct a communication framework within which counselling (interpersonal negotiation) can be done. The counselling communication structure should be constructed so that both counsellor and help seekers feel free to discuss, visualize (map), reflect on, or write about, any idea, feeling or topic that is relevant to the problem or concern being investigated and discussed. For counselling to be viable, both methods of communication and content of communication must be culturally sensible to the help seeker, and to the counsellor as well.
- Narrative ability. This means being able to use stories, story fragments, and conversations, as well as literary models such as autobiographical self, authoring, metaphors and other language tools to build understanding, personal knowledge, and to promote planning and meaning-making action.
- Life space mapping. "Mapping" means to use the concepts of life space and autobiographical self as a means of visualizing complex situations, re-organizing life activities, producing choices and plans and re-authoring selves, futures and personal projects. A map is a visualization or drawing.
- Sociotechnical interface skills. This means the ability to show help seekers how to use databases, networks, web pages, and other technical tools for expanding the information/knowledge capacity of the individual.
- Dialogical communication. Dialogue is the preferred mode of communication in SocioDynamic Counselling. Dialogue refers to the 'flow of meaning reciprocally between communicators. Dialogue is a pre-requisite for thinking together, or collective planning. Genuine dialogue makes possible the generation of new ideas, perspectives and frames of meaning.

### Is SocioDynamic counselling a philosophical approach?

Yes. Whenever a person faces a difficulty, uncertainty, or concern in life, they are posing the question: “How should I live my life?” and “What should I do next?” These are philosophical-moral questions that merit a philosophical-moral response. This will lay the foundation for subsequent decision or action. SocioDynamic Counselling practice uses psychological, sociological and pedagogical knowledge; however it is based on a philosophy of helping. “How should I live my life?” is a philosophical question and one that SocioDynamic Counselling is designed to address in active, co-constructive ways.

### What are some of the main ideas that guide SocioDynamic Counselling practice?

- Life space—this refers to a way of visualizing how a person’s life experience, personal knowledge, and life activities are organized as inter-connected configurations of meaning and operate to constitute, an autobiographical self. Instead of exploring the individual’s personality, the counsellor, jointly with the help seeker, explores the help seeker’s life space.
- Autobiographical self—implies that we are defined by the stories and personal accounts that we tell, write and visualize. Also, that we are multi-voiced, historical beings who are always situated in culture and who author or co-author our lives. The concept of autobiographical self is in contrast to concepts of the self such as an ‘information processor’, ‘machine’, ‘set of variables’, ‘system of traits’ or ‘behaviour profile’.
- Communication and culture. Communication (speaking, writing, visualizing) and culture(a design of pathways for living) are in dynamic relation and produce each other.
- Human face. Personal and social responsibility become manifest when people meet face-to-face as human beings without the masks of objectivity, indifference, impersonality, and differential status roles. Human face implies open-mindedness, empathy, and attitudes of respect and care.
- Life story, narrative, and dialogical conversation. Methods of understanding the experience of others (and self) and a means of establishing common ground and cooperation. Implied is an interpretive and open-minded perspective on how people live, and how they construct themselves and society.
- Joint-action/negotiation. Counsellor and help-seeker co-construct and negotiate meaning. Through their joint actions they produce the counselling process itself, and co-construct insights, choices, plans and resolutions.

- Personal projects. The activities that people do in order to move toward goals they value. A personal project must be personally meaningful to the individual and must be culturally sensible as well.
- Personal freedom and the transcendent individual. Freedom is defined as actualized capacity. Increased capacity extends the range of choices open to a person and increases eligibility to participate in various sectors of social life. The person who extends his or her capacities and thereby is empowered to transcend obstacles (both inner and outer).
- SocioDynamic counselling supports the extension of capacity, which increases the range of available choices and the eligibility to participate, and thus to pursue goals that help seekers value. This is the meaning of personal freedom. Another way of saying this is that SocioDynamic Counselling has an emancipatory function. In a democratic society, it is assumed that adults should be able to choose the goals that they value and wish to pursue. Except when individual help seekers are planning or engaging in socially destructive or cruel actions, choices and plans, the desires of help seekers should be respected by counsellors. It is not consistent with the SocioDynamic perspective to arbitrarily impose choices or actions simply because the counsellor has the power to do so.
- Counselling occurs in culturally defined contexts. Counselling is a cultural practice and uses cultural tools (mostly language, but also many other cultural tools). Counsellor and help seekers use cultural tools to construct/co-construct 1) the counselling process and relationships, 2) knowledge of the help-seeker's situation and relevant history, 3) the framing of problems, and 4) the production of mental, emotional and action solutions to the question: "How should I live my life?"

### Is SocioDynamic Counselling a form of career counselling?

Yes, in the sense that the most important career that an individual has is the career (course) of his or her own life. Career-as-vocation is replaced by the concept of life-as-career. The person (embodied, autobiographical self) is conceptualized as a dynamic interaction of five areas of meaningful life experience and activity: 1) work/learning, 2) relationships/intimacy; 3) health/body; 4) spirituality/philosophy of life; and 5) leisure/recreation/creativity.

When an individual's concern is with career, employment, job, training, etc., the focus of the counselling session is mainly on work life. However, at all times it should be kept in mind that the five areas of the self are interactive. Each sector of the self may influence others and to be influenced by them.

SocioDynamic Counselling is designed to keep open a view of the whole person although the focus of counselling at any moment may be on a specific topic or part of

the person's life space/self. No counsellor can be expected to counsel competently in all sectors of life. Therefore, one of the responsibilities of the SocioDynamic Counsellor is to maintain a consultative and referral network of counsellors and other professional colleagues spanning all areas of life space.

### Is SocioDynamic Counselling a form of personal counselling.

Yes—in two senses. First, since all counselling is an attempt to help the individual person, all counselling is personal regardless whether the focus is career, work life, job-hunting, rehabilitation, capacity building, conflict resolution, self-authoring, etc. SocioDynamic Counselling is a practice that recognizes the uniqueness, wholeness, and integrity of the person.

Second, the helper approaches the help-seeker in a personalized manner. This means showing a human face, and not facing the other in a detached, distanced manner. The counselling relationship is constructed jointly by two persons, and not by an expert alone. The basic attitude of the helper is one of respect for the other person. The help-seeker acts to construct an atmosphere of care for the other, and not to construct a diagnosis of the other. From a SocioDynamic perspective, the helper is “objective” toward his or her own self, and openly dialogical with, or subjective toward, the other person.

### What are important features of the counselling relationship from a SocioDynamic Perspective?

- All helping relationships are culturally defined
- The counselling relationship is co-constructed by counsellor and help seeker working together. In other words, the counselling relationship is an interactional achievement. It must be continuously negotiated.
- Solutions and understandings arrived at during the counselling relationship and process are neither known beforehand by the counsellor, nor are they the outcome of the help seeker's efforts and potential alone. They are the products of joint actions on the part of both counsellor and help seeker
- The counselling relationship is built through the use of cultural tools—of which there are two main kinds:
  - Mental tools—mainly symbolic/linguistic/communicative, and
  - Technical tools—such as computer, book, film,
 In part, the concept of cultural tools replaces the concepts of psychological techniques.
- The counselling relationship is based on respect, common ground and joint action and meaning making.

- The counselling relationship is a type of shared bricolage in which counsellor and help seeker use the materials at hand to invent possible insights and solutions to concrete and often unique concerns faced by the help seeker. A very important concept in SocioDynamic Counselling is *guided participation*. This means that the counsellor has the mentoring function of actively participating with the help-seeker in counselling activities that will enable the help-seeker to appropriate (learn) cultural tools useful to problem solving.

Guided participation does not mean advising, intervening, telling, teaching, coercing, or manipulating the help seeker. It does mean actively participating with the help-seeker in a way that provides helpful ideas, tools, and examples to the help-seeker. The relationship between counsellor and help seeker is neither directive-prescriptive nor non-directive-facilitative. It is more like mentoring and is closer to reciprocal apprenticeships. Each learns from participating with the other.

### Why does SocioDynamic Counselling require a new vocabulary?

- To reduce the psychopathologization of everyday life. This means to shift counselling discourse away from deficiency, psychopathology, and weakness and toward potentiality, possibility, and capacity
- To help realize the goal of regarding an individual as a 'whole person' and not as a set of variables and adjustable behaviours.
- To open counselling and the minds of counsellors to a far wider range of explanatory models that they are customarily given in their training. For example, expanding counselling models of explanation to include literary models (story, narrative, authored life, autobiographical self, social speech, language tools, etc.). Concepts are borrowed from sociological thinking, cultural studies, and philosophy in order to bring counselling discourse close to life and, at the same time, move counselling discourse from exclusively psychological to moral, cultural, and social explanations and descriptions of human thinking and acting.
- Much of current counselling is in the grip of psychological and psychometric thinking, and in the grip as well of economic imperative and commodification. SocioDynamic Counselling advocates the loosening of these grips. Further, the view is taken that counselling is an open space between people where a variety of ideas and practices can flourish in the name of seeking answers to the question: "How should I live my life?"
- A constructivist vocabulary encourages counselling to be in a state of perpetual evolution, changing as culture changes and as human needs change. Counselling is a 'liminal practice'. By "liminal" is meant 'neither this

nor that', a practice always in transformation. SocioDynamic counselling is designed to provide counsellors with ideas and practices for working with conditions of ambiguity, uncertainty, indeterminacy and transitional states. For a minority of people in contemporary social life, life is wonderful. For a much larger group of people, life is at once better and worse. For another large group of people, life is more depressing and more marginalized than in previous times. Counselling needs a new vocabulary which provides counsellors with the perspective and capacity for helping people who are trying to decide how best to live in rapidly changing, complex, multi-cultural worlds.

What SocioDynamic Counselling projects have been undertaken so far?

In Canada:

- Counselling for Canadian unemployed steelworkers under the auspices of the Canadian Steel Trades Employees Commission (1988-95)
- Project for at-risk youth in Toronto, Ontario (1996-1999)
- Work re-integration counselling for the Yukon Territorial Government (1994-1998).
- Constructivist Career Counselling Courses at George Brown College, on-going

International:

- On-going training courses for employment and career counsellors in Finland;
- On-going training courses for Immigrant school counsellors and other counsellors in Denmark;
- On-going training courses for educational, employment, and immigrant and refugee counsellors in Sweden.
- Seminars, lectures on SocioDynamic Counselling (1994-2000) in Iceland, Spain, Estonia, United States, Australia

In the following section of this paper, comments from users of SocioDynamic Counselling are presented.

<p><b>THE VALUE OF CONSTRUCTIVIST COUNSELLING FROM THE STANDPOINT OF COUNSELLORS.</b></p>
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[⊗ THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS ARE BY COUNSELLORS WHO HAVE HAD TRAINING IN SOCIODYNAMIC COUNSELLING. I HAVE CHANGED WORDING ONLY SLIGHTLY FOR CLARITY, BUT HAVE RETAINED THE ORIGINAL MEANING].

- It is close to the way I and my client experience life
- Constructivist counselling is very inspiring—it is a hopeful method and provides tools for getting work done in the counselling sessions.
- It has a philosophical turn to it, and I find this very liberating. Now I feel permission to use my sense of irony and humour.
- It has helped me to respect clients from other cultures and other clients who are different from me
- I have been amazed at how mapping helps clarify for both of us.
- I think I have been a constructivist for years without knowing it.
- With most clients, I find the partnership attitude really helps with the problem of power in the interview
- Constructivist methods have made me a much more active and energized counsellor
- Now I can see patterns of behaviour more than I used to—how one thing connects to another in the client's situation.
- The emphasis on context has shown me the importance of not forgetting the bigger picture
- I love the focus on meaning and meaningful action. Before this I had never felt that I had a good motivation model.
- The very ideas that we are meaning-makers and world-builders is so uplifting and hopeful
- I find that the concept of multiplicity is enormously useful to me. It is good for both me and my clients to work in a world of possibilities rather than in a one-way-only world.
- One of the big improvements for me is now I try to get my clients and myself engaged in activities rather than just talking. Now we have mapping, project designing, working with metaphors. We really are building new realities
- In a word, the constructivist orientation has encouraged me to perceive my clients with respect, and to have more respect for myself.

- In a counselling session where we have done a map or designed a project, we both feel that we have done something, we have a product.
- Paradoxically, I feel that I now have a more responsibly caring attitude toward my clients. At the same time I don't feel like I am totally responsible to see that everything turns out all right and it is not all my responsibility that the client's decisions and plans are flawless and logical, and permanent. I am now on the side of self-responsibility for both my client and myself.
- For me the biggest gain has been in adopting a more democratic, open conversation and communication. I now can hear multiple voices, I honour them, I let myself be open to change and have dropped my subtle efforts to control and direct the other by my use of words and voice tone.
- I feel freer to be creative, flexible and am willing to be friendly and humorous. I think that most of the time, my client and I are a good team. We both enjoy our time together. We are able to invent good resolutions and solutions when we work together.
- I do group counselling. Now I use more activities, I encourage dialogue, and I provide a more active experience for my groups. We have more a feeling of working together and sharing common experiences.
- I wish I had known about constructivist counselling years ago. I really like the active participation of both counsellor and client. And I really like the story and metaphor work in this counselling.
- It is very empowering to work on creating a future, and taking the attitude that there are many possibilities and paths in life.
- I especially like the existential nature of this counselling—paying attention to what is going on right now, in the situation of concern. And the values of responsibility, hope, courage, struggle, liberation. I feel like I can help my clients begin to find a way out of marginalization and alienation
- For me, it is so valuable that I now have acquired a lot of tools to work with: words, maps, symbols, metaphors, objects, artwork, role-playing, deconstruction questions, writing, visualisations, responsive, sensible conversation, designs, internal dialogue, external dialogue, witnessing, as-if experiments, life space exploration, and more.
- The idea of common ground has certainly helped me learn to construct bridges between myself and clients who are different from me. I work a lot with immigrants, some of whom come from cultures very different from mine. Now I realise that I can let them teach me something about their culture—words, symbols, foods, customs, clothing, ceremonies, music, artwork, family life—and in

my learning their ways, they learn something of my ways. We are able to find common ground in that we actually know something about each other as cultural members.

- I used to think that I had to be a “culture-expert”. Now I realise that it is much better to be an expert on allowing others to teach me about their ways. I can take a stance of not-knowing and invite my clients to educate me. The main point is, we get “culture-smart” bridges built. We can then move on to other counselling and guidance tasks which will be helpful to them in finding work, getting educated, and handling resource problems.

### THE VALUE OF CONSTRUCTIVIST COUNSELLING FROM THE STANDPOINT OF HELPSEEKERS

(Some of these comments come from those whom I have counselled; other comments I have taken from interview tapes that counsellors have given to me for supervisory feedback. The comments come from help-seekers ranging in age from 16-60. Main help-seeker groups include 1) unemployed steelworkers, 2) immigrants, 3) adults seeking career counselling, 4) and adults seen for personal problems in a private counselling practice).

- I felt much clearer; the mapping especially clarified my situation for me.
- It was good to make a plan.... now I have some idea where I want to go and what influences I have to deal with.
- It was nice talking to the counsellor...I felt respected and not put down.
- I liked the way the counsellor asked questions that made me think. It made me really look at my situation and my part in it.
- I was surprised when the counsellor asked me about my life back in Ethiopia—no counsellor had done that before. We had a really good talk. After that talk I wanted to come back to see the counsellor.
- At first I thought he[the counsellor] was kidding. No one had treated me as a kind of partner before...but it was really good that we could both put our ideas together and make a good plan for me. I had to get used to him first...my other counsellors always told me what was the best thing for me to do.
- I liked the way my counsellor was active and respected me. I felt like she listened to me and actually cared about how I felt. It was very healing.
- I was amazed at making the map and finding my voices. I had not realised how hard on myself I am. That was a very insightful experience for me.

- My counsellor asked me to look at my situation and myself from the outside, like I was a visitor from Mars. For the first time I could see how foolish some of my ideas are about how my mother and I get along.
- I don't know just what my future will be. Making those different futures and then showing what I will have to do to get to one of them was very helpful and clarifying for me. I had never really thought of my future as something I could have a hand in bringing about before. That was good.
- Telling my story to her was really good for me. She listened so carefully and asked me some smart questions. Afterward, I wrote a letter to myself as I imagine I will be ten years from now. I had never done anything like that before. I felt so encouraged to keep on trying to make things different and better for myself at work. I plan to keep that letter for ten years and see what really happened in my life.
- For the first time in my life, I found someone who understood that I don't like school because it doesn't mean anything to me. We began to look for other things I could do, or how school activities could be meaningful for me. Making a map of meaningful activities in my life inspired me. It gave me some ideas that I hadn't thought about before.
- What I liked was that the counselling helped me begin to see how I might get a handle on my problem, that maybe I am not helpless, that there may be actions I can take to get on with things. I tend to blame other people for everything bad that happens to me. This constructivist counselling made me think about what "I" can do.
- I liked the mapping. I loved the personal way my counsellor talked to me. I think she actually saw me. We made up a list of questions for me to ask myself. And then to write answers. I have already done most of them and next Monday I am going back to talk my answers over with my counsellor—and the questions too. I even have a couple of questions for her to answer. She is really neat... she is intelligent and she challenges me to think about what I am doing...and not doing.
- This is the first time in my life that I have ever been unemployed. When we made up a list of activities that I do and which are meaningful to me, it gave me ideas about what kind of work I might try to train for. At first I was disappointed that my counsellor could not give me some answers...but then later on I began to see that I had to make a plan for myself that I could live with, and made sense to me...my counsellor helped me do a plan.... a map he called it.
- I wasn't doing very well in school so I was sent to the counsellor to find out what was the matter. I had never had anyone listen to me so quietly and carefully before. I started to tell her about my mom who has cancer and is probably dying. I started to cry. She just let me cry and kind of respected my need to cry. She didn't

do anything but I could see kindness in her face. It was wonderful —the first time I was able to share with anyone else how I feel about my mom. It is like now I have a friend who knows about my struggle. When we pass in the hall she says my name and smiles. What a big load off my shoulders! I can even think about my schoolwork. The other day we did a map about my family. I hadn't realised before how we are all influenced by my mom's cancer.

- I am a Cree Indian. This way of counselling is good for my friends and me. It matches our worldview about how the world is always in flux. Amidst all this change, each of us has a responsibility to others and to ourselves. This counselling is also respectful. I appreciate that. I am different and come from a different culture. I want to be respected as I am. Most of the time people want me to be the same as they are, but I will never be that. Also, in our culture we live in meaning. This is the first time counselling has been like that for me.
- Doing the metaphor activity gave me a lot of new information about my self and what I want in the future. I like poetry. I like to think that my life is a poem and I can write it. The metaphors helped me to find some meaning for my life. I especially liked the idea that my life is like a tree.

- Who has developed SocioDynamic Counselling?

Dr. R. Vance Peavy, Professor Emeritus and Adjunct Professor at the University of Victoria and his associates have developed SocioDynamic Counselling over the period 1974-2000. Dr Peavy has been officially recognized in Canada, Sweden, and the United States for his contributions to the profession of counselling in those countries. He can be emailed at: [drpv@pacificcoast.net](mailto:drpv@pacificcoast.net). and visited[after February 30, 2001] at his website: [www.sociodynamic-constructivist-counselling.com](http://www.sociodynamic-constructivist-counselling.com) Also view the book, *SocioDynamic Counselling: A Constructivist Perspective* at [www.trafford.com](http://www.trafford.com) or [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) .

SocioDynamic Counselling is a Canadian invention and is registered as a Canadian Trademark.

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[www.sociodynamic-constructivist-counselling.com](http://www.sociodynamic-constructivist-counselling.com)

## PART II:

## A TABLE OF CONSTRUCTIVIST PRINCIPLES FOR GUIDING SOCIODYNAMIC COUNSELLING PRACTICE

By  
Melanie Coleman

The following is a list of constructivist principles that I use to implement my counselling practice. Much of what has been listed below has been taken from seminar notes, course hand-outs, and from the book, SocioDynamic Counselling: A Constructivist Perspective by Dr. R. Vance Peavy. I have given permission for this list to be distributed to other counsellors [Melanie Coleman, George Brown College Mentoring Group, [mjc787@indirect.com](mailto:mjc787@indirect.com)]

### 1. Constructivist counselling is a philosophical framework, not just a series of tools and techniques

- Constructivist Counselling is a philosophical framework, not a just a series of tools and techniques. It is a mindset that the helper walks into the room to meet with the helpseeker with. Essentially, counselling or helping is a general method for working with people to choose, plan, and act as they try to move forward in their lives.
- The goal of Constructivist Counselling is to emancipate and empower the helpseeker. It is also important to remember that the helpseeker has the answer to their questions. They will not receive it through the helper's advice or speculation.
- From the Constructivist perspective, career is synonymous with life. In other words, the concept of career should not be the centrepiece of career counselling. Counselling is a general methodology for life planning. Counselling is also a process rather than an established plan of action. This is mainly because we are different today than we were yesterday. We are constantly evolving. As a result, Constructivist Counselling as a cultural practice inclined to holism rather than compartmentalization. Humans are not objects or products or labels.
- Everyday living is an ongoing conversation. Civilization is a conversation. Cultures are conversations. Society is a conversation. Families are conversations. Relationships are conversations. Counselling is a conversation. Each individual is a collection of biographical stories - all of which are inter-connected and each of which has a voice. Counselling is a conversation where listening is as important as speaking. Conversation has to be based on some common ground - which has to be negotiated and constructed by both parties. A conversation may or may not lead to common understanding. It is not desirable to think that good counselling always leads to a fully mutual understanding and agreement about topics and issues. Essentially, counselling is an occasion for giving voice to some biography - one's voices is strongly influenced by one's social location in daily life - especially in terms of perceived power relationship in the immediate social situation.
- Finally, when a helpseeker comes seeking assistance with any aspect of life, she or he is asking a philosophical question, i.e. "How should I live my life?" What is

the right thing to do? What reasons will help me decide how to move forward in life in ways that allow me to achieve my goals and do so in a way that does not bring harm to others? (ethical decision making). It is for this reason that Constructivist Counselling is philosophically based as opposed to a collection of tools, theories and techniques.

## **2. The helpseeker is viewed as a whole, unique and complex system**

- Helpseekers are viewed as whole and complex systems rather than as collections of compartmentalized needs and traits, a fragment, stereotype or carbon copy.
- Each helpseeker is regarded as a unique person with unique concerns to be addressed. These concerns have specific meanings, now, in this specific context.

## **3. The helpseeker and helper are partners**

- The helper and helpseeker are partners. The dynamics within the meeting between the helpseeker and helper, therefore, are more democratic than authoritarian. Although the power differentials cannot (in most cases) be completely dissolved, it is important for the helper and eventually the helpseeker to be conscious of the power factors and seek to reduce the use of power as an instrument of control and oppression. Ideally, the helper and the helpseeker seek to use power in a manner that is beneficial to the helpseeker and to the relationship between the helpseeker and the helper.
- The session between the helpseeker and the helper is one where both work together - both bring something to the session. The helper brings knowledge of communication and of how to make interaction constructive and helpful while the helpseeker brings knowledge and experience of their own life - their dreams, fears, memories, desires, and what they hope for their future.
- The helpseeker guides the conversation and the helper brings information and guides the helper. Each is showing the other the way.

## **4. Helpseekers are to present a human face**

- It is important that the helper present a "human face" of care, respect, patience and moral responsibility during the time they spend with the helpseeker.

## **5. Possessing an understanding of what is within the control of the helpseeker and focusing on the present**

- With respect to the issues that the helpseeker is facing, some things can be solved, others must be lived through, others are mysterious.
- When meeting with the helpseeker, it is important for the helper to pay attention to what is going on right now in the helpseeker's life.
- It is also helpful to focus more on the process rather than the outcomes of counselling. Each session is customized to meet the needs of the helpseeker.

Co-construction and the use of personally meaningful knowledge and activity are the centerpieces of the counselling process.

### **6. Helpseekers must be ready to work on their issues and assume self responsibility**

- Before a helpseeker can work on issues, it is important that they are ready to work on issues. If they are not ready, it is important that the helper work with them to help them get ready, i.e. via conversation about their life or something other than the helpseeker's concern. In this respect, as the helpseeker, it is important to match the helpseeker's pace and flow of experience. Don't rush the session.
- It is also important, throughout the helper/helpseeker relationship that the helpseeker learn to assume self-responsibility over their lives, to take control and not assume that primarily external forces are controlling their lives.

### **7. The helper's ability to self observe and be a "clean" listener is critical**

- It is critical that the helper is able to recognize and be aware of her or his own biases, prejudices, actions in the situation - i.e. how they converse and listen; what their assumptions and biases are; noticing both their physical and emotional-mental reactions in interpersonal relating, etc.
- When a helper is aware of how they are reacting, and are controlling their own assumptions, this helps them become a "clean" listener - where they are simply listening to the helpseeker without making judgements or assumptions about what they are saying, or what they "should" do.
- As a by-product, this practice, on the helper's part, may also teach the helpseeker about her or his own ability to self-observe.

### **8. The first visit**

- It is important that the helper emphasize on the first visit - not only that they are credible and willing to help, and that there is hope, but that they are there to partner with the helpseeker - not tell them what to do.
- This provides the helpseeker with an atmosphere of trust and care and allows the helpseeker to speak freely and frankly, or remain silent.

### **9. It is a privilege to be allowed into the helpseeker's life**

- It is a privilege for the helper to be allowed into the life of the helpseeker.

### **10. It is the helper's responsibility to look at where the helpseeker is now**

- It is important that the helper start with where the helpseeker is right now as well as review and understand what their major concern is.
- It is the helpseeker's standard that is important, not society's standard.

### **11. The helper is flexible and willing to change their mind**

- It is important that the helper enter the session with the helpseeker with a flexible attitude and be willing to change her or his mind if given good reasons.
- As a helper, it is important to have a desire to understand rather than be right.

**12. Helpers assist helpseekers with the understanding that they have options and inner criteria**

- One of the major tasks of the helper is to help helpseekers discover that they have options.
- It's also important to work with the helpseeker to develop internal criteria for evaluating their own self-development and learning.

**13. Respect and empathy are essential**

- Two essential core attitudes that the helper brings to session are respect and empathy (difference is just as important as mutuality).

**14. Making appropriate referrals when necessary**

- It is the responsibility of the helper to refer when a helpseeker's issues are beyond the helper's scope, competence and ethical responsibilities.

**15. It is important to recognize and appreciate diversity**

- The recognition and appreciation of diversity is key in constructivist counselling. No single reality reigns supreme in the world
- We humans are diverse and are always evolving (ethnicity, economic status, age, religious perspectives, etc.)
- It is key that the helper enter the relationship with the helpseeker with a culturally sensitive perspective.
- Using culturally sensible vocabulary; paying close attention to the helpseeker's manner of communicating, both verbally and non-verbally; opening oneself to learn and to be taught by others and about their food, artwork, humour, family relations, protocols, etc. are all very useful

**16. The helpseeker assumes that, instead of one true reality, individuals face multiple realities**

- It is important for the helper to try to enter the helpseeker's situation through the helpseeker's eyes. Each person knows things in different ways and knowing things defines how we act.
- It's also important to remember that living is a transformative process, i.e. everyone is constantly evolving - none of us remain fixed in a permanent frame, despite the fact that we commonly make this assumption.
- Having an understanding of multiple realities also dictates that certainty is elusive and much of the human world is not very predictable. Constructivists are more interested possibilities, alternatives and options.
- Some realities are more and less useful. Part of the role of the sessions with the helpseeker is to determine which realities are more and less desirable.

**17. Meaning moves individuals to purposeful action**

- According to Constructivist thought, lifespace equals everything that has meaning for an individual. Life space investigation is done through listening, speaking, taking turns, questioning, respecting silence, remaining open to patterns,

relations and how the different elements of a person's life are linked in webs and networks.

- Individuals search for, and are powered by, meaning in their lives. Meaning, which can spring from work, love and play, is a motivating power of great significance, as meaning moves individuals to purposeful action.
- Part of the role of the helper is to help people reflect on the implications of both new and old self-knowledge in relation to the concern under consideration (such as career planning), in order to find meaning. New meanings are part of the self-construction and reconstruction process.
- Helpers work with helpseekers to help them develop clearer, richer meaning. This is in contrast to attempting to change or understand the behaviour of the helpseeker. If something has meaning, individuals move towards it.

### **18. We construct our own lives**

- The self is a do-it-yourself project rather than a do what others advise project. We create and attempt to balance our selves through projects in life, through relationships and through self-reflection. We are naturally inclined towards holism rather than fragmentation. We also prefer that our life feels "coordinated" and has meaning. The session in which the helper and the helpseeker work together is a workshop where participants co-construct useful strategies for coping with life-space difficulties and strive to invent solutions.
- According to Constructivist thought, it is important that individuals transform their vision of themselves as objects or helpless victims to projects. A project is not only something they can know about, it also sets a task for them to do and a meaningful purpose for them to fulfill.
- It is essential that each helpseeker be involved in building, organizing and constructing her/his own life, always in context and always through relationships. We do not discover reality, we invent it. We create our own world-view and we act on it.
- We negotiate and construct our own paths in life in cooperation with other people. We produce ourselves, our relationships, our societies and cultures.
- The process of construction includes experiencing, reflecting, making meaning, interpreting and acting. This process goes on endlessly.
- Selves, relationships and society are socially constructed through everyday activities of social life, we construct who we are, what we believe and express and we contribute to the continuing construction and reconstruction of the relationships in which we are participants and in the society in which we are members. Our willingness to engage in social life activities is greatly influenced by the degree to which an activity creates personal meaning in our doing of it. One of the most important goals of constructivist counselling is to enable individuals to become eligible to participate in social life in ever more meaningful and effective ways.

### **19. The helper has a number of tools at her/his disposal**

- People learn by doing. There are a number of activity-based tools, therefore, that can be used to help the helpseeker explore what is meaningful to them. These

include mapmaking, autobiographical works, storytelling, letter writing, self-characterization as assessment (character sketch written in the third person), creating personal projects, tree creation (family job, family cultural), portfolio assessments (reflects strengths, skills, facts and accomplishments), resumes, and reflections on the helpseeker's own future plans, past achievements and present status.

- Other tools that the helper can use in the session include metaphors, deconstructive and reconstructive questioning, as-if experiments, and working with the helpseeker to design a plan. When working with the helpseeker to design a plan, planful conversation is used where the helper is responsible for the planning in consultation with the helpseeker. The aim of planning is to make transitions. The aim of constructivist assessment (planning) is to help helpseekers make transitions and move from one life status to another with the greatest amount of self-empowerment possible.
- Helpers also use dialogical communication. Through this form of communication, listening is given preference and it is more of a negotiation process aiming towards consensual agreement, all the while maintaining a respectful openness to difference. This form of communication can help free muted voices.
- Once the life-world understanding is achieved, and this is always only partial, the ground is established for co-constructing projects. A project is an activity or set of activities where the helpseeker moves forward in his or her life world toward a preferred future.

## **20. It is important to review the helpseekers relationships and life space**

- The quality of an individual's life hinges on the quality of relationships in which that person is a participant. We are all part of the human web. According to Vance Peavy, "we are two parallel processes acting simultaneously. We are individuals with unique psychological journeys in life and at the same time we are social and cultural beings and exist as integral parts of an organic network of life. Each person lives in a social space (life space) within which he or she is forever coordinating, reviewing, interpreting and creating meaningful actions and patterns of activities."

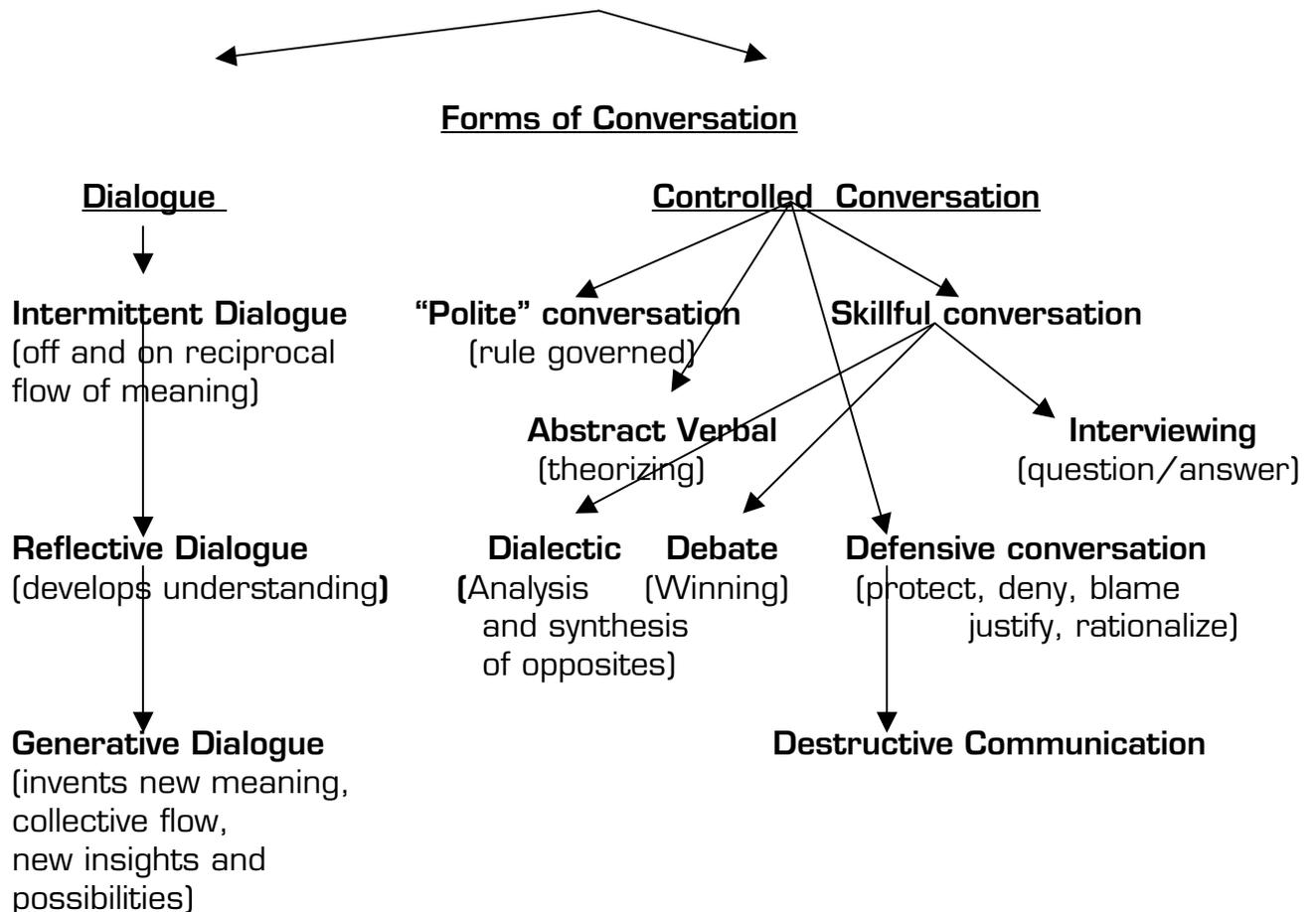
## **21. People use stories and speak in different voices**

- Most people are concerned with four major areas in life or configurations of organized meaning. This is their life space. These areas include worklife/education, health/wellness, relational, and spiritual.
- As individuals, we speak, hear and tell stories in different voices, as mother, teacher, daughter, employee, etc. Each of these stories has meaning attached to it and are connected.
- The helper is looking for stories from the helpseeker, rather than facts.

## PART III: COUNSELLING TOOLS FOR THE SOCIODYNAMIC COUNSELLOR

1. A **philosophical framework for helping** is the primary tool for sociodynamic counsellors in understanding and giving help to other humans and their existential concerns. This worldview serves as a 'thinking guide' in identifying what the concern is, whose responsibility it is do something about the concern, and what should be done.
  
2. **Cultural tools** comprise the actual 'tools for getting things done' within counselling. The category of 'cultural tools' partially replaces psychological concepts and techniques in the SocioDynamic perspective. There are two categories of tools, mental and technical.
  - a. **Mental tools.** This includes linguistic tools such as words, sentences, texts, diagrams, maps, drawings, metaphors, flow-charts, numbers, alphabets, dramas, songs, ceremonies and other cultural-symbolic artefacts such as models, theories, etc. Mental tools are used to 'get things done'—such as inform, produce understanding, persuade, etc.
  - b. **Technical tools.** This includes cultural inventions such as chair, pencil, computer, television, article of clothing, machine, paper, and countless material items that humans use to get things done.
  
3. **Common ground.** This concept refers to the finding and creating of common knowledge, experience, or interest on which to build a working relationship. For example, a counsellor who, earlier in life, had the experience of being a refugee, is in a better position to establish understanding and a working relationship with a refugee help seeker than is a counsellor who has always been a non-immigrating member of a given culture's dominant majority.
  
4. **Life space mapping.** Each individual is the center of a configuration of inter-connected meanings—meanings attributed to all of the significant experiences, relationships, knowledge, and events of the person's life. In other words, a person is said to inhabit, or dwell in, a space filled with personal meanings. **Mapping** refers to a drawing or 'map' that a help seeker—guided by counsellor makes of some aspect of his or her life space.

- 5 Dialogical communication.** Dialogue, which is defined as 'reciprocal flow of meaning' is the preferred mode of communication in SocioDynamic Counselling. A table of possible communication modes follows.



- 4. Personal project planning and initiation.** Assisting the help seeker to create, plan and initiate projects(activities) that are personally meaningful, linked to a goal that the help seeker wishes to reach.

## Part IV: IMPLEMENTING A SOCIODYNAMIC COUNSELLING STRATEGY

1. Build a cooperative working relationship.
2. Regard counselling as an intelligent two-person team
3. Use dialogue and joint intelligence to form solutions, new understandings, meaningful action

### A CHART OF SOCIODYNAMIC COUNSELLING

