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Philosophical Counseling as a Form of Supporting Human Resilience

Poradnictwo filozoficzne jako forma wspierania odporności człowieka

ABSTRACT

KEYWORDS philosophical counseling, human

resilience, counseling,

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SŁOWA KIJICZOWE

poradnictwo

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The topic of this article is philosophical counseling as an effective tool to support human resilience. Philosophical counseling encourages individuals to become aware of their beliefs and values, develop critical thinking skills, and find essential meaning in life. However, it may not work for everyone and should be used as a complementary tool alongside other forms of support, such as humanistic psychotherapy. Undoubtedly, it is also important to consider systematic research on the potential benefits and limitations of philosophical counseling in supporting, for example, individual mental health, well-being, and broadly understood human resilience.

ABSTRAKT

Tematem niniejszego artykułu jest zagadnienie doradztwa filozoficznego jako skutecznego narzędzia wsparcia ludzkiej odporności. Doradztwo filozoficzne zachęca jednostki do uświadomienia sobie swoich przekonań i wartości, rozwijania umiejętności krytycznego myślenia i odnajdywania zasadniczego sensu w życiu. Może jednak nie być odpowiednie dla każdego i powinno być stosowane jako

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narzędzie uzupełniające wraz z innymi formami wsparcia, takimi jak np. psychoterapia humanistyczna. Niewątpliwie ważne jest także rozważenie systematycznych badań nad potencjalnymi korzyściami i ograniczeniami doradztwa filozoficznego we wspieraniu np. indywidualnego zdrowia psychicznego, dobrego samopoczucia oraz szeroko rozumianej odporności człowieka.

Evolution of the Meaning of Philosophical Counseling

In the modern world, professional philosophers are mainly concerned with research and teaching, that is, they create, discover, and disseminate a particular kind of reflective knowledge. For this reason, philosophy is included in the group of subjects called the "humanities."These disciplines reflect the general nature of the human condition. The methods, tools, and means used within their fields of activity and interest differ from each other (Padin 2013: 23). While these reflections are often considered valuable in themselves—"beautiful," "profound," and "inspiring" are words used to express this value—they are also considered to have little or no practical value at all. Moreover, it is assumed that their intrinsic value is "timeless" because they should be attractive to all people with sufficiently mature abilities, sensitivity, and reflection throughout adult life. This means that the desire for self-reflective knowledge is not a function of any specific life situation or problem, but is a completely universal need. Those who excel at detailed, abstract descriptions of the human condition or those who have an extraordinary talent for conceptual analysis or logical argument—become philosophers. Traditional philosophy can therefore be defined as a subdiscipline of the humanities that seeks to develop and disseminate a specific type of self-reflective knowledge. This knowledge, inherently valuable, is commonly thought to be useless in a practical or applied sense (Padin 2013: 24).

In the first half of the 20th century, it was rare to turn to a philosopher for support regarding one's difficulties in life. This is because many philosophers limited philosophy to the analysis of language (Cohen, Sinaich 2013: 1–11). This linguistic approach held that the philosopher's role was not to solve the personal, social, life, moral, or political problems that people faced. Rather, the philosopher's role was to examine the language used to express terms such as "good,"

"bad," "ought," and "ought not." This limited approach to philosophy resulted in the belief that philosophy had no practical application. In contrast to this position, it is believed that philosophy can be useful in solving existential problems. The possibility that philosophers could offer help in managing one's affairs also began to be recognized.

The development of the literature on practical philosophy was a gradual process, reflecting changes in the social, political, technological, and moral landscapes. As a result, philosophers have been able to explore novel topics such as cyber ethics, cloning, genetic engineering, and nanotechnology (Cohen, Sinaich 2013). Moreover, the field of professional ethics has provided a platform for philosophers to engage in various fields such as medicine, law, engineering, journalism, business, and social services. Despite progress in applied ethics, there are still critical opinions in the philosophical community according to which philosophy should not deal with practical aspects of life, because this area—in this understanding—is reserved for psychology.

Although it is generally assumed, referring to its history, that psychology has its roots in philosophy, the fields of psychology and psychotherapy should be treated as separate from philosophy. Philosophy can nonetheless play a significant role in counseling focused on supporting a person's mental resilience in the face of difficulties, thus becoming a more practical philosophy that can be applied in everyday life—and not only in academically (Stefaniak 2023: IX-XV). Some philosophers see their role as helping people solve life's problems through philosophical means, maintaining that psychological practices should differ from philosophical practices. In this understanding, philosophical counseling is a separate field from its psychological counterpart. A similar position is held by Elliot D. Cohen and Jon Mills, who claim that philosophy, counseling, and psychotherapy play mutually interdependent and supportive roles (Cohen, Sinaich 2013: 1-11; Mills 2013). They support this view with the need for cooperation between practitioners and theoreticians of philosophy and psychology, which is also characterized by mutual benefits (Cohen, Sinaich 2013).



Philosophical Counseling Compared to Other Forms of Human Support

Philosophical counseling can be a way to aid and strengthen mental resilience, which as a type of counseling is a relatively new discipline. Its contemporary roots are often traced to the work of Gerd Achenbach, who in 1981 founded the first modern philosophical practice near Cologne, Germany (Achenbach 1995; Padin 2013: 16–17). Some, however, associate this modern practice with the works of various ancient Greek philosophers, such as the Cynics, Stoics, and even Socrates himself (Hadot 1995; Taylor 2013: 71–72). Nowadays, philosophical advisors work with individual and institutional clients, e.g. the Polish Philosophical Counseling Society's project at the Youth Educational Center for boys in Kalety (2018/2019) (Woszczyk 2020). In Poland, interest in the subject of philosophical psychotherapy is growing more and more. In practical terms as well, philosophical consulting offices are being established more and more often and there is a growing interest in using the achievements of philosophy in other disciplines and areas of social functioning. Examples of such initiatives include the conference organized in 2013 by the Pedagogical University of Łódź called "Philosophical Psychotherapy in Education" (Stefaniak 2023: 131). Another initiative was the 6th National "Psychiatry and Spirituality" Conference in November 2023, organized by the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow in cooperation with the Department of Psychiatry, Collegium Medicum of the Jagiellonian University, the University Hospital in Krakow, the Department of Psychology of Religion and Spirituality at Ignatianum University in Krakow, Dr. Józef Babiński Clinical Hospital in Krakow, and the Krakow Institute of Logother-(https://wf.upjp2.edu.pl/aktualnosci/vi-ogolnopolska-konferencja-psychiatria-i-duchowosc-2425-xi-2023-331.html, n.d.).

Philosophical advisors use techniques inspired by various philosophical trends and practical experiences, sowing the seeds of professional structures. Such structures will be needed if philosophical counseling is to survive and develop in contemporary societies (Padin 2013: 17). Despite this progress, the discipline still lacks an established paradigm, which hinders its development.

It is worth emphasizing that philosophical counseling belongs to a broader category of disciplines, often referred to as "helping professions" (Padin 2013: 18). An attempt to define the scope of philosophical counseling will be an outline of the distinction between philosophical counseling and other forms of human support.

Philosophical counselors try to help their clients solve life problems, that is, problems that result in a general inability to, for example, work, take care of themselves, interact with people, or maintain long-term relationships. According to this hypothesis, the professions most closely associated with philosophical counseling are psychotherapy and pastoral counseling. As a consequence, they are defined in more detail below.

The difficulty in defining psychotherapy arises from the fact that there are many different types, each with its own assumptions, methods, and goals. A look at the history of psychotherapy can bring order to this seemingly chaotic phenomenon. Psychotherapy developed in the context of the medical community, which in the late 19th century began to base its treatment methods on a scientific understanding of the person. As a result, traditional psychotherapy is modeled on medical practice, which aims to provide causal or scientific explanations for "mental illness" and its treatment. According to this view, scientific explanations of mental illness must be viewed in terms of causal psychological laws, which in turn must be discovered through empirical research similar, in most of the important aspects, to empirical research in other sciences. Furthermore, treatments for diseases/disorders discovered as a result of these scientific efforts are expected to be based on so-called "medical models" (Padin 2013).

Depending on the patient's diagnosis, the role of the doctor or psychotherapist is to help the patient maintain or restore health. Of course, in this model, the concepts of "illness" and "health" play a key role in defining the goals and practice of psychotherapy (Padin 2013: 19). According to an extensive analysis first formalized by Charles Culver and Bernard Gert, the category of "disease" also includes injury, disability, and even death itself. What all of these conditions have in common is that they are considered a particular "evil," distinguished by the fact that they cause a loss of function and may be accompanied by painful and/or life-threatening conditions. In this context, disease should be understood in relation to concepts



such as "health" or functioning within normal limits (Culver, Gert 1982). This means that traditional psychotherapy aims to cure the client's existing mental illness by removing its underlying causes, thereby enabling the individual to function at a socially acceptable level (Padin 2013).

Historically, the nature of psychotherapy has been criticized mainly from two sides. On the one hand, Thomas Szasz and the radical psychology movement criticized the concept of mental illness. One of the most effective aspects of their critique was the attack on the idea of "normality." Szasz argued that "normality" is socially defined and therefore socially significant. Moreover, it is essentially a normative or evaluative concept that does not specify any objective conditions (Szasz 1991: 79–97). Instead, it refers to a range of distinct behaviors grouped by a dominant society concerned only with creating wealth and maintaining social order. Thus, Szasz argued, the concept of mental illness falsely defines "deviance"—that is, failure to meet minimum social standards—and often leads to the serious mistreatment and even oppression and stigmatization of people defined as mentally ill (Szasz 1991). Therefore, Szasz argued that the concept of mental illness should be rejected altogether.

Behaviorists also attack the concept of mental illness, arguing from a philosophical and observational point of view that the actual causes behind all mental disorders lie entirely outside the individual. This line of thinking led to an interest in causal states rather than individual psychological processes, giving rise to the view that mental illness should be treated by changing the social environment. From this perspective, behavior that goes beyond accepted norms is a symptom of a dysfunctional social situation (Padin 2013). Collectively, these lines of attack led to a decline in the influence of the medical model, which in turn paved the way for many changes, including the development of humanistic psychotherapy. The uniqueness of this approach is that it rejects the exclusive focus on disease that characterizes the medical model. Humanistic psychology is not only concerned with helping people maintain health, but also explores the possibility of expanding human potential. Starting with Maslow, many humanistic psychologists believe that every person has an internal drive that pushes them toward self-actualization and self-transcendence (Gibas 2017: 17). Another characteristic feature of this approach is the focus on

"reflective awareness" rather than on unconscious processes. Describing humanistic psychotherapy, W.C. Tageson argued that regardless of the preferred terminology, all humanistic psychologists seem to agree on the uniqueness of human consciousness (Tageson 1982: 33, see also Padin 2013: 20). Because of these ideas, humanistic psychotherapists adopt what Carl Rogers called a "client-centered" (or "person-centered") approach to therapy, which emphasizes the client's autonomy (Rogers 1973; Padin 2013: 21). Humanistic psychotherapy therefore differs from psychotherapy based on the medical model in that it aims not to overcome illness, but rather to expand human potential, allowing the client to become aware of the innate new possibilities of their mind, thus facilitating the process of self-actualization (Padin 2013). In this respect, philosophical counseling shows certain analogies to the trend of humanistic psychotherapy presented above.

Another form of human support is pastoral counseling. Pastoral counseling developed in specific institutional contexts, namely, the various Christian churches. Its task is often interpreted as striving for some basic, religiously defined goal (Steckel 1993: 28, see also Padin 2013: 22).

However, the significant increase in psychological problems in the modern world, combined with the decline of the authority of traditional institutions—including the Church (undoubtedly caused by a combination of technological progress, urbanization, secularization, and the unrestrained growth of capitalism, as well as intra-church scandals)—has caused the clergy to notice the need to strengthen their skills in dealing with the challenges of today. This has led to the widespread uncritical adoption of traditional psychotherapeutic tools. Recently, however, pastoral counseling has begun to return to its religious roots. Pastoral counseling can therefore be defined as a form of ethical counseling that seeks to help its clients achieve a religiously defined overarching goal, using both religious hermeneutics and some psychotherapy techniques to help resolve its clients' life problems by helping them gain insight into the nature of both themselves and their problems. Ultimately, this approach assumes that these problems result from voluntary actions rooted in "fallen," sinful human nature. Resolving them will, in part, involve adopting



a religiously sanctioned and institutionalized understanding of the approach to life (Padin 2013: 22).

In the context of the positions presented above, it is clear that the goal of philosophical counseling is not to provide a general philosophical education to all interested parties, but rather to provide specific philosophical insights that may be useful in helping individuals (or institutions) overcome the specific problems they encounter. That is, the goal of philosophical counseling is to help clients reflect critically on ideas and worldviews relevant to specific, practical life problems that may emerge using philosophical methods. Due to the focus on supporting clients in their difficulties, the institutional setting for the practice of philosophical counseling must also differ from traditional philosophy. Philosophical counselors do not teach specific courses to a general audience, but must respond to the individual concerns of their clients (Padin 2013: 24–25). Although a philosophical advisor will use the same set of tools as a traditional philosopher and will seek to generate self-reflective knowledge, the focus is on the client, who is interested in these tools and knowledge because they are relevant to a particular problem, not because they are general knowledge.

Philosophical counseling, unlike traditional philosophy, should be classified as a helping profession, as it most closely resembles helping professions such as psychotherapy and pastoral counseling (Padin 2013: 25). However, philosophical counseling must also be different from other helping professions. Philosophical counseling must differ from psychotherapy in that it does not attempt to cure "mental illness" and, in particular, it cannot be based on a medical model. This has two consequences. Firstly, philosophical counseling is a philosophical endeavor and therefore cannot address the causes of life problems if they are understood in terms of a psychodynamic, social, or organic process. Philosophical counseling focuses on the causes of problematic beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Therefore, if we distinguish philosophical counseling from psychotherapy, it must be assumed that problematic ideas, beliefs, and worldviews often contribute to life problems and that critical analysis and revision of these ideas can help solve these problems. Philosophical counseling should be characterized by a critical analysis of the client's hidden worldview (Padin 2013). The second consequence is that if philosophical

counseling cannot be based on a medical model, it must reject "health" as a normative ideal. The aim of philosophical counseling cannot be to restore the client to some minimal, socially (biologically) determined level of functioning, nor can it be used to treat disorders. Therefore, philosophical counseling seems to be very similar to ethical and worldview counseling. Philosophical counseling focuses on the client's conscious choices and is particularly interested in the moral and axiological aspects of the client's beliefs—understanding the client's life goals in relation to their values.

However, if philosophical counseling is to be distinct, it must also differ from pastoral counseling. The difference is that philosophical counseling is independent of any religious institutions. As such, it does not have to be bound by any religious worldview or to assume that any particular (religiously sanctioned) way of life is necessarily superior to all other ways of life. Therefore, philosophical counseling cannot impose on the client a view of a good life based on a given denomination. Moreover, it does not have to accept a religious interpretation of the world or the sources of life's problems, and therefore does not have to use religious hermeneutics as a central tool (Padin 2013: 26–27).

Philosophical counseling provides clients with an initial definition of a good life. This means that the philosophical counselor does not impose on the client their substantive views on the nature of a good life. Instead, they allow clients to set their own initial goals (and thus define their own problems); although these goals may require philosophical reflection, the counselor cannot set them except through critical reflection on the client's ideas. In this respect, the practice of philosophical counseling is very similar to the practice of humanistic psychotherapy. Moreover, it is also "client-centric" in the sense that it respects the client's autonomy in defining the original problem. A philosophical counselor is interested in helping clients clarify and evaluate their ideas and worldviews related to current issues. Unlike humanistic psychotherapy, philosophical counseling understands its clients as beings who act primarily on the basis of a potentially valid worldview (Padin 2013).

Taking into account the similarities and differences outlined above, the meaning of philosophical counseling can be further defined. Philosophical counseling is a helping profession that seeks



to critically understand ideas and worldviews relevant to clients' life problems. Therefore, philosophical counseling does not deal with problems resulting from unconscious, social, or organic causes, but is interested in life problems related to or resulting from the client's ideas and worldview (Padin 2013: 27–28). Philosophical counseling is a process in which a counselor works with a client to critically reflect on ideas and worldviews related to specific life issues that are raised in counseling sessions or have been defined by the client. For these life problems to be appropriate topics for philosophical counseling, they must arise from philosophical issues motivated by the client's implicit worldview. The process of philosophical counseling therefore involves the clarification of the client's life goals and life problems, as well as the relevant aspects of the client's worldview (which are believed to underlie the client's problems); a critical analysis of this worldview, in which deeper layers can be uncovered through philosophical questions, analyzes these questions and "fixes" the worldview (Padin 2013).

Due to the nature of philosophical counseling, there is no doubt that clients should be provided with emotional support. The customer must be able to feel comfortable and safe. However, the client must also be viewed as a rational partner who must make statements about the world, understand that these statements may be true or false, and value truth (Meier 1989: 78). If the client fails to adopt this mindset, they need special attention to help them do so. If the client is unable or unwilling to adopt this attitude, they will not benefit from philosophical counseling and should be referred to another type of counselor. Therefore, although a client's ideas may be wrong or confusing, each client should be respected as a reasonable person.

Finally, it is important for counselors to explain to clients the boundaries of philosophical counseling. Many life problems result from circumstances beyond the client's control and beyond effective counseling. Advisors are not always able to find a "cure for a sick society" and should make their clients aware of this. Moreover, the goal of philosophical counseling is not just to make clients happy and satisfied, but rather to clarify and refine the clients' ideas and worldviews through a process of critical reflection. It is believed—although not guaranteed—that such reflection can often solve the client's problems and may even lead to happiness, but the philosophical counselor

must focus on the analysis of the worldview relevant to the client's life problems, not on the life problems themselves. Clarifying and refining these ideas and worldviews is often beneficial in itself. Moreover, such an explanation may solve some existing problems. However, taking into account the definition of philosophical counseling that I defend in this article, philosophical counseling should be understood in a rather modest way. Philosophical counselors can provide a unique and valuable service—critical analysis of problematic ideas and worldviews—but philosophical counseling is not psychotherapy. It may therefore promise some practical life wisdom (Waller 2013).

Philosophical Counseling as a Tool to Support Human Resilience

Philosophical counseling, as mentioned above, is a relatively new form of counseling that uses philosophical concepts and practices to help individuals develop resilience. Resilience is the ability to cope with difficult situations, overcome adversity, and adapt to changes (Stradomska 2018). Resilience is also defined as a dynamic process of positive adaptation that occurs in the context of significant adversity. This definition means that in order to talk about mental resilience, two conditions must be met: firstly, the life difficulty that occurs must be in the form of a threatening environment or various other adversities, and secondly, despite these disadvantages, the individual should achieve a state of positive adaptation and balance (Luthar et al. 2000: 543).

Philosophical counseling encourages individuals to examine their beliefs and values, develop critical thinking skills, and find the essential meaning of life. This can lead to greater self-awareness as individuals become more aware of their own thought processes and motivations (Stradomska 2018). By examining their beliefs and values, individuals can identify areas in their lives that need improvement. This can help them develop a stronger sense of purpose and direction in life. By better understanding themselves, individuals can become more resilient and better able to cope with difficult situations.

However, philosophical counseling may not work for everyone. Some people may not be interested in philosophical inquiry and philosophical concepts may not be helpful in solving their problems. Additionally, some people may prefer other forms of counseling or



may not have access to philosophical counseling due to a lack of qualified practitioners in their field.

Philosophical counseling can help individuals develop critical thinking skills, which are essential for dealing with complex situations and making good decisions. By developing these skills, individuals can become more resilient and better able to cope with challenges. Critical thinking skills can also help individuals develop a greater sense of confidence and independence.

However, philosophical counseling may not be appropriate in all situations. Some people may need immediate intervention that philosophical counseling cannot provide, for example, in the case of severe mental illness or trauma. Additionally, some people may need more specialized forms of counseling, such as cognitive behavioral therapy or group therapy.

Philosophical counseling can help individuals develop a greater sense of meaning. A greater sense of meaning can help individuals cope with difficult situations and find joy and satisfaction in life. By exploring philosophical concepts such as ethics, morality, and spirituality, individuals can deepen their understanding of their place in the world and purpose in life. This will help them overcome adversity.

In summary, philosophical counseling can be an effective tool in supporting human resilience, encouraging individuals to become aware of their beliefs and values, develop critical thinking skills, and find essential meaning in life. However, it may not work for everyone and should be used as a complementary tool alongside other forms of support.

Despite the challenges facing philosophical counselors, the philosophical counseling movement is gradually growing. Associations and practitioners can be found in many countries around the world. In Poland, there is the Polish Society for Philosophical Consulting, which was established to promote the idea of philosophical practice, professional consolidation of advisors, to improve professional skills, and to ensure high ethical standards in the industry (Polish Society for Philosophical Consulting, n.d.). Undoubtedly, it is also important to consider research on the potential benefits and limitations of philosophical counseling in supporting individuals' mental health, well-being, and resilience (Stefaniak 2023: 129–138).

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