

ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ / RESEARCH ARTICLE

WHISPERS FROM COUNSELORS to CLIENTS: CULTURAL ASPECTS of SELF-DISCLOURE

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ABSTRACT

Self-disclosure may be presented in many forms and serves many purposes as when and how it is used depends on the counselor's theoretical orientation. Existing literature includes several discussions on the use and content of self-disclosure but the studies exploring self-discussion in our culture are relatively limited. Therefore, this study aimed to examine self-disclosure from counselors' perspectives in the cultural context. This study is qualitative in nature. By sending through emails, 12 volunteer counselors were interviewed. Each participant was asked to fill a questionnaire consist of open-ended questions and a demographic form. Additionally, a case was presented and the participants were asked whether or not they would disclose and how they would intervene. A descriptive and content data analysis procedure was utilized. As a result, the participants defined self-disclosure as "sharing". It has been stated that self-disclosure behavior is most frequently used for "awareness-raising" and "being a model". When participants asked about the cultural appropriateness of self-disclosure, nearly all of them responded that it is appropriate to the culture. Results and implications are discussed in the context of our culture.

Keywords: Self-Disclosure, Counseling, Culture

JEL Codes: I00, Z00

DANIŞMANDAN DANIŞANA FISILTILAR: KENDİNİ AÇMA DAVRANIŞINA KÜLTÜREL AÇIDAN BAKIŞ

ÖZET

Kendini açma davranışı, günlük yaşamda bir kişinin kendisine ait özel bir bilgiyi başkasına aktarması olarak tanımlanırken psikolojik danışma alanında psikolojik danışmanın danışana kişisel yaşantısı hakkında açılımında bulunması olarak tanımlanır. İlgili alan yazını, kendini açmanın, psikolojik danışmanın kullandığı kuramsal yaklaşıma bağlı olarak ne zaman, nasıl ve hangi amaçla kullanıldığına ilişkin çalışmalar içermektedir. Ancak bu çalışmalar ülkemizde dahil olmak üzere farklı kültürlerde kendini açmanın ortaya çıkışını inceleme açısından sınırlı kalmaktadır. Bununla beraber, bir yandan ilgili alan yazının kendini açmayla ilgili farklı görüşler içermesi, öte yandan da kuram ve uygulamada karşılaşılan farklılıklar psikolojik danışmanların bazı zorluklarla karşılaşmalarına neden olabilmektedir. Bu nedenle, bu çalışma psikolojik danışmanların kendini açma davranışını nasıl değerlendirdiklerini anlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu nitel çalışma 12 gönüllü psikolojik danışmanla gerçekleştirilmiştir. Her bir katılımcıya kendini açmaya ilişkin soruların yanı sıra demografik bilgilerin de istendiği bir form verilmiştir. Bu formda ayrıca, örnek bir durum sunulmuş ve böyle bir durumda psikolojik danışman olarak kendilerini açıp açmayacakları nedenleriyle birlikte sorulmuştur. Verilerin analizi için "tanımlayıcı ve içerik analizi" kullanılmıştır. Bu çalışmanın sonuçlarına göre, katılımcılar kendini açmayı "paylaşım" olarak tanımlamışlardır. Kendini açma davranışına en sık "danışmana farkındalık kazandırma" ve "model olma" için başvurulduğu dile getirilmiştir. Katılımcıların hemen hemen hepsi kendini açmanın kültürel yapımıza uygun olduğunu ifade etmişlerdir. Bulgular ilgili alan yazını ışığında tartışılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kendini Açma, Psikolojik Danışma, Kültür

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1. INTRODUCTION

Self-disclosure, for the first time, is defined as the act of revealing personal or private information about oneself to another person (Jourard, 1971). Hill and O'Brien (1999) defined it helper's presentation of personal experience. Developmentally, most people have had adequate reasons to learn to protect central parts of selves, not only from others but also from their own consciousness (Kempler, 1987: 109-117.). In the therapeutic process, self-disclosure swings between one directions to another since the meaning of self-disclosure is inconclusive. According to several researchers (Weiner, 1972: 42-51; Watkins, 1990: 477-500; Edwards & Murdock, 1994: 384-389; Hill & Knox, 2001:413-417) self-disclosure of therapists which are presented in many forms serves many purposes, it can be an expression of therapists' feelings, a description of therapists' early life experiences, a response to a question or a behavior such as giving a gift to clients. Edwards and Murdock (1994: 384-389) stated that over 90% of therapists self-disclose to clients, however, the implications of the therapist self-disclosure is unclear, with highly divergent results from one study to the next. Likewise, the classification of self-disclosure varies according to different researchers, such as Nilsson, Strassberg, and Bannon (1979:399-404) defined self-disclosure either in terms of interpersonal which involves therapists' sharing of beliefs regarding client problems, therapeutic relationship or therapists' revealing of personal information about outside of therapy session. It is also categorized into 3 which are inescapable (experiences that are unavoidable to conceal from a client), inadvertent (therapists' unconscious expression of feelings by voice tone or body language) and deliberate (intentional sharing) by Piezer (1997: 450-469). According to Hill and Knox (2001: 413-417), there are different subtypes of self-disclosure such as disclosure of facts, disclosure of feelings, disclosure of insight, disclosure of strategy, disclosure of reassurance and support, disclosure of the challenge, and disclosure of immediacy.

Historically, among other therapeutic tools, self-disclosure is a controversial topic. How and how often the uses of self-disclosure are mostly based on therapists' different theoretical orientations, such an example, Yalom (1985) states that self-disclosure differentiates between various theoretical schools more than any other therapeutic tools. Beginning with *Psychoanalysis*, which emphasizes the therapist's neutrality and therapist's role as a blank screen, definitely opposes self-disclosure of therapists that leads to transference/countertransference issues (Golfried et al., 2003:555-568). Since Nilsson, Strassburg, and Bannon (1979: 399-404) suggested, self-disclosure may deteriorate a critical transference relationship that also damages the therapeutic process and outcome. Differently, *Humanistic* approaches view self-disclosure as a relationship-building tool. Robitschek and McCharty (1991: 218-221) described self-disclosure in therapy as a way of showing the therapist's genuineness and positive regard for clients. *Cognitive/Behavioral* therapists are expected to find self-disclosure as beneficial as Humanistic therapists since the bond between the therapists and clients is essential. Parallel to this, Hill and Knox (2001: 413-417) stated that to challenge and change irrational beliefs of clients and model to them, self-disclosure of therapists is unavoidable. On the extreme proponents' part, *Feminist Theory* placed a high value on therapists' self-disclosure that is also one of the core elements of the therapeutic process and outcome as empowering the client (Brown & Walker, 1990:135-156). Simi and Mahalik (1997: 465-483) agreed that self-disclosing have the power to decrease power differentiation by promoting more egalitarian a relationship and provide more options for clients to choose a role model. This theory, as promoting women's equality, views self-disclosure and the therapist's use of self as a core principle of the therapeutic process. Likewise, *Relational Therapy* gives emphasis to therapist's self-disclosure since it promotes empathy and focus on normalcy and self-disclosure makes relational movement and growth by the therapist's representing himself or herself in the therapy (Tantillo, 2004: 51-73). It is likely for most of the therapists that not only deciding on self-disclosure but also to decide on the content of disclosure, theoretical orientation was seemed to be effective.

Self-disclosure patterns have been found to differ by culture. It has also been found that European Americans and Asians/Asian Americans exhibit different rates of self-disclosure. European Americans have been shown to self-disclose more than Asians/Asian Americans. American culture upholds values of self-expression and autonomy, encouraging direct communication of inner feelings and needs (Kim & Ko, 2007). On the other hand, Asian culture upholds values of interdependence and harmony, encouraging indirect communication of needs and less disclosing of information about self (Kim & Ko, 2007). The different characteristics of Turkish culture which is swinging between West and East make the society mostly collectivistic and sometimes individualistic. This collectivistic nature of society makes Turkish people more oriented to believe in fate and luck and they have the general sense that the external other is capable of controlling everything (Aydin, 2000:281–298). This external locus of control enables the view of authority and this authority is believed to correct everything that goes bad (Aydin, 2000: 281–298). Their psychological well-being is highly affected by from this fatalistic outlook and likewise, they suppose therapists as powerful authority. As Öztürk and Volkan (1971; cited in Aydın, 2000), the passive expectant attitude of clients, their lacking of autonomy and initiativeness force therapists are to be more active and directive in the therapeutic process. Therefore, self-disclosure may seem as not desirable and common in Turkish culture. When looking at studies, researchers (Selçuk, 1995; Kökdemir, 1995; Erdost, 2004) mostly were interested in high school and university school students' self-disclosure to others. Studies that are looking for helpers who are therapists, counselors, psychologists are lacking. Therefore, this study aims to explore the culture-relevant aspects of self-disclosure. Specifically, therapists/counselors' definition of self-disclosure, their views about self-disclosure goals, utility, hazards, and appropriateness of Turkish culture were sought. The motivation for this study comes from the fact that although there is a substantial amount of literature abroad about self-disclosure, there are limited numbers of studies including therapist's self-disclosure in Turkey. With this motivation, the present study seeks answers to the following questions: 1) What are counselors' perceptions about self-disclosure? 2) Do counselors believe that self-disclosure is appropriate for Turkish culture? 3) What factors do they take into consideration while they make self-disclosure?

2. METHOD

2.1. Research design

This study adopts a phenomenological perspective (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) for examining self-disclosure from counselors' perspectives in the cultural context in a qualitative inquiry.

2.2. Participants

Participants of the study were 12 (9 females, 3 males) Psychological Counselors either working as assistants or school counselors. Their ages ranged from 22 to 35 ($X=27.2$) and more than half of them are beginner counselors. All the participating counselors were volunteers and they were reached with a snowball sampling method (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005). They were reached by their email addresses and asked their permission to participate in this study.

2.3. Instrument

In the present study, firstly, participants were asked to complete a demographic data form including age, gender, major, professional seniority, and theoretical orientation. Additionally, participants were given a written questionnaire form including open-ended questions and a vignette was given to the participants. Specifically, participants were asked the following questions: a) What are your self-disclosure definitions? b) What do you think about self-disclosure goals, benefits, hazards, and its cultural relevance? Each counselor was allowed to list their ideas as much as they wished.

Additionally, a case was given to participants describing the situation where self-disclosing is an issue. This case topic was chosen because it is one of the most mentioned issues in self-disclosure needed in the literature. The case was “your client tells about a traumatic experience in the third session and you are asked to answer the questions thinking that you have experienced a similar traumatic event there years before. Three closed questions related to the case were asked; 1) How would you intervene in that case? 2) What factors do you think while making self-disclosure? , and 3) How much do you disclose? The time of completion of the questions varied from 15 minutes to 30 minutes.

2.4. Data Analysis

In the present study, data were subjected to descriptive and content analysis (Miles&Huberman, 1994) were used to examine the data. First of all, the main themes were described. In this process, categories were identified for each question. Next, another researcher checked the categories. When there was a disagreement between researchers on the categories, a consensus was reached. In the end, there was an agreement on the process of coding and the identified codes and themes. Finally, after all of the coding, theme identifying, and consistency checking processes, the frequencies of the theme and sub-themes were calculated.

3. RESULTS

After analyzing the data, the final sample was composed of 12 participants with the age ranging between 22-28 (with a mean age of 25.5) and 29-35 (with a mean age of 33). Women comprised 75% ($n = 8$) and men comprised 25% ($n = 4$) of the sample. The majority of the sample was counseling assistants who work in the university ($n = 5$; 41.6%).

The remainder of the sample included 4 (33.3%) school counselors, and 3 (25%) psychological counselors. A total of 4 (33.3%) participants indicated their theoretical orientation to be “client-centered,” and other 4 (33.3%) as “humanistic”, while 3 (25%) answered as “eclectic” and remainder of the sample answered as “other” to this question.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Counselors

Title	Options	N
Age	22-28	8
	29-35	4
Gender	Female	9
	Male	3
Profession	Counseling Assistant	5
	School Counselor	4
	Psychological Counselor	3
Years of profession	1-5 years	6
	5 and beyond	4
	0-1 years	2
Educational background about self-disclosure	Yes	11
	No	1
Theoretical Orientation	Client-centered	4
	Humanistic	4
	Eclectic	3
	Rarely	7
Frequency of self-disclosure	Sometimes	5

The descriptive and content analysis of the data revealed 6 main themes about the participants' definitions of self-disclosure, the goals to use it, the usage of disclosure for appropriate and

inconvenient situations, the reluctance of self-disclosure and cultural aspects of self-disclosure. Below, the data related to each theme were analyzed separately

3.1. Definitions of self-disclosure

The three sub-theme of definitions of self-disclosure; sharing (feeling, experience, and privacy); providing positive outcomes to clients (similarity, trust, profit, support, comfort) and normalization (making client feel less alone) were stated. All ten participants stated the same idea that self-disclosure as if “*sharing*”. One participant stated self-disclosure as if the counselor’s belief about the benefit on expressing similar experiences to clients. Another participant indicated self-disclosure as the counselor’s effort to show the client that other people face similar or the same situations and experience similar thoughts or feelings.

3.2. The goals of using self-disclosure

Related to the theme of goals of using self-disclosure, four sub-theme were categorized; normalization (making the client feel less alone, making the client feel understood and similarity); providing clients positive gains (profit, insight, trust, encouragement, solution); preventing negative aspects of therapy (anxiety, stuck, resistance) and focusing on clients. Related to normalization sub-theme, almost all of the participants pointed out the goal as the counselor’s wish to give the message to their clients that “*I understood you*” and “*You are not alone*”. Ten participants stated that goal of self-disclosure should be to provide confidence to the client, by the way, to minimize resistance to the therapeutic process. Specifically, three participants mentioned the prevention role on negative aspects of therapy such as “*to decrease anxiety*”.

3.3. The use of self-disclosure for appropriateness

The usage of self-disclosure for appropriate situations was categorized under two the sub-themes; effective therapeutic process (dealing with stuck, being a role model, forming a trust, providing profit); and normalization of clients’ feelings (making clients less alone, forming similarity) which are a shareholder with the themes of definitions and goals of self-disclosure. In terms of the effective therapeutic process, participants declared “*self-disclosure would be useful if the counseling process is blocked and if the client starts to spin around the same axis*”. Other participants stated that it would be useful when considering that there is no way of being useful to the client and when being sure to be effective.

3.4. The use of self-disclosure for inconvenient situations

The usage of self-disclosure for inconvenient situations was divided into three sub-themes. All participants stated the misuse themes (not focusing on clients, faulty role models, breaking of confidentiality, trust, and therapeutic bond). Another sub-theme was an exaggeration (quantity, details, less controlled knowledge, inexperience). The last theme was counter-transference. All of the participants reported that it is not dangerous for the clients but only one of them stated counter-transference as a risk. Most of the participants indicated the hazards of self-disclosure as “*If a counselor starts to disclose himself/herself more often, the focus point in therapy can shift. And sometimes when the counselor tells the client a detailed example of what makes himself in the same situation, the client would use the same remedy even if it is not suitable*”. Furthermore, participants mentioned the importance of the amount and quantity of sharing.

3.5. The reluctance of self-disclosure

The reluctance of self-disclosure question also had an essential result for this study in which three main themes, circumlocution (little explanation, prevention of asking, giving advice and surface knowledge); focusing on the client (emphasizing cliental issues in therapy, emphasizing individual differences), and presentation of the imaginary case were identified. Here, the most interesting finding was that the presentation of an imaginary case, since there was no study about it in the literature. The

participant stated, *“If the client insists on self-disclosure from me, I explain something not as me, but as someone else”*. Likewise, other participants said that *“I can try to change the subject without breaking the client by saying that this time is reserved for your time zone, we can another appropriate time frame for and go back to the core subject”*. Another participant added that *“I can give answers which do not include details or I can answer which can cut the client’s such questions”*

3.6. Cultural aspects of self-disclosure

Next, when participants asked about the cultural appropriateness of self-disclosure, nearly all of them responded that it is appropriate. But only one of them stated that self-disclosure is not eligible since it may lead to faulty role modeling of therapists to clients. The participant stated, *“If a counselor makes self-disclosure, the client may feel disappointed as if his/her counselor needs helping before himself/herself”*. The rest of the participants seemed to accept self-disclosure as convenient to our culture by emphasizing Turkish people’s needs of *“dertleşmek”* (having a heart to heart talk) when having difficulty in their life. Another characteristic of Turkish people was stated from one participant as *“Sır vermeden sır alınmaz”* (if you do not share a secret, you can not receive). Additionally, another interesting explanation came from another participant that *“for most of the Turks, counselor or other helpers such as psychologists or psychiatrists seem as if “ilahi güç” (Godly power) which means they have all the best answers in their hands to give clients. If the counselor shares some similar feelings, the client may normalize the power of the counselor with himself/herself and accept more responsibility to take for his/her life. Therefore, self-disclosure seems appropriate to our culture”*.

Lastly, the factors that counselors take into consideration while self-disclosing to their clients indicated that among the participants, nine of them who responded vignette stated that they share a similar experience with their clients, but three of them stated as if clients request information from them. When considering the most popular factors of self-disclosure that were classified by the therapists are clients’ awareness and counselors’ favor of being a role model. However, gender, diagnosis of clients and rapport were the least responded factors.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study is aimed at investigating the counselor’s approach of self-disclosing to their clients. The results of the study indicated that nearly all findings are in accordance with the current literature (Knox et al, 1997:274-283; Edwards & Murdock, 1994:384-389). Most of the participants defined self-disclosure as if “sharing”. Next, the most important goal of self-disclosure was found to be giving an empathetic message to clients such as “I understood you...” and by the way make normalization. According to Edward and Murdock (1994) normalization is one of the most popular reasons to accept self-disclosure effectiveness since especially beginner counselors perceives self-disclosure as one way to increase the similarity between clients and counselor. The most appropriate time to use self-disclosure was defined to be “dealing with stuck” situations while the most undesirable time to use self-disclosure was when the counselor tries to change the focus from client to self. Eventually, all of the participants adjusted their amount of self-disclosure according to therapeutic standards. Contrasting the literature that participants of the study declared that they could deal with the self-disclosure by presenting an imaginary case in which they would explain something personal as if it belongs to someone else.

Potentially the most important finding of the study that self-disclosure is a cultural phenomenon. Since culture is a very important structure, and it can cause some difficulties in counseling process, many researchers have conducted studies of culture’s influences (Aydin, 2000: 281–298; Doğan, 2000:57-67; Gülerce, 2008: 237–251). All these authors emphasized the differences between Turkish and Western cultures. According to Doğan (2000:57-67), psychological theories cannot be directly adapted to Turkish culture. Instead, they can be adapted and integrated into the Turkish cultural context.

Unlike Western culture, Turkish people use gestures and symbols in order to communicate with others (McWhirter, 1983 in cited from Poyrazlı, 2003). All psychologists and counselors reflect their cultural features during counseling sessions. For example, the touching clients shows trust and intimacy in Turkish culture, whereas in Western culture touching cannot be easy for them (Aydin, 2000:281–298). In terms of self-disclosure, self-disclosure is seen as a way of communication, expressing emotions verbally which enables the counseling process (Selçuk, 1989; Çakır, 1994; Gültekin, 2001: 231-241). Selçuk (1989) added that the counselor's self-disclosure has the benefit of providing confidence and perception of friendly.

Overall, the results of the study indicated that counselors who work in schools were less likely to use self-disclosure in their profession but they all seem to have some education and positive perception about self-disclosure. As argued earlier, they find their education about self-disclosure as deficient. Therefore, some additional courses might be offered to universities to include self-disclosure issues in their curricula, since sharing is one of the characteristics of our culture. However, most of the people especially beginner helpers do not know where to stop or continue in sharing. Additionally, more studies should be carried on about client or counselor factors in self-disclosure since knowing those factors in disclosure may prevent risks of self-disclosures in the sessions. Lastly, to prevent ineffective and uncontrollable self-disclosures, more studies about dynamics of self-disclosure should be conducted with counselors and psychologists.

Finally, this exploratory study has some limitations. First of all is that due to the qualitative nature of the study, the generalizability of the findings is limited and the results need to be cross-validated with a larger number of participants. Validation of the results with a larger number of experienced counselors is also essential to understand the benefits of self-disclosure as an advanced counseling technique.

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