Enabling Counsellors: An Exploration of the Social Construction of Disability among Maltese Counsellors

Amy Camilleri Zahra
Department of Disability Studies, Faculty for Social Wellbeing, University of Malta, Malta.
Counselling and Disabled People (1)

• Counselling is identified as one of the ‘seven needs’ of disabled people by the UK’s Derbyshire Coalition of Disabled People (Davis & Mullender, 1993).

• Counselling is generally recognised by disabled people as one of the core areas of support necessary for those who wish to live independently and in the community (Priestley, 1999).

• Disabled people want counselling services which are accessible to them, and counsellors who are knowledgeable about the social model of disability (Reeve, 2004).
Counselling and Disabled People (2)

- Disabled people are a particular client group which is generally avoided by counsellors (McLeod, 1998; Parritt, 2012; Reeve, 2004).

- Reasons for this avoidance might stem from counsellors’ perception that working with disabled clients is a specialist or challenging area to work in (Marini, Glover-Graf, & Millington, 2012; Parritt, 2012).

- Parritt (2012) adds that, like most people, counsellors might also be holders of the conventional idea that disability is something which only happens to others, and thus might feel compelled to distance themselves from the issue.
Aims and Objectives

• To gain an understanding of Maltese counsellors’ social construction of disability.

• To understand how Maltese counsellors construct the meaning, experience and the psycho-social implications of disability based on their social interactions.

• To look at the language that Maltese counsellors use in order to construct their own vision of the reality that their disabled clients inhabit.
The Research Questions

1. How do Maltese counsellors define disability?

2. How do Maltese counsellors perceive their disabled clients in comparison with their non-disabled clients?

3. What is the Maltese counsellor’s role in the counselling process with disabled clients?
A Note about the Terminology

• For the purpose of this research project, the distinction between ‘disability’ and ‘impairment’ as put forward by the social model of disability was adopted.

• Furthermore, the term ‘disabled people’ rather than ‘persons with disabilities’ was adopted in order to refer to “people with impairments who are disabled by socially constructed barriers” (Clark & Marsh, 2003, p. 2).

• Whereas the term ‘persons with disabilities’ was rejected since the term implies that: “the disabling effect rests within the individual person rather than [stemming] from society” (Clark & Marsh, 2003, p. 2).
A Note about the Context

• This study was set in Malta, a small island centrally located in the Mediterranean Sea.

• Malta has an estimated population of 420,000 people with disabled people making up 7.23% of the total population (National Census, 2011).

• Counselling is a relatively new profession for Malta.

• It was only in 2008 that a Masters in Counselling degree started being offered at the University of Malta.
Method

• A qualitative approach

• Sample size: 6 counsellors; 1 male and 5 females

• Recruitment of Participants:
  • The Malta Association for the Counselling Profession (MACP)
  • The Department of Counselling, Faculty for Social Wellbeing, University of Malta

• Criteria for Inclusion:
  • Masters in Counselling
  • Worked as a counsellor in Malta
  • Maltese citizen

• Data was collected through 1 hour semi-structured individual interviews and was analysed using Thematic Analysis.
# Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Clients</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Years of Practice</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Integrative - Existential</td>
<td>Various</td>
<td>Medical setting</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gloria</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Systemic - Humanistic and Rogerian</td>
<td>Various – but mainly families</td>
<td>Private Practice</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Martha</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Humanistic, Gesalt and Adlerian</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Educational setting</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paula</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Humanistic, Systemic and Narrative</td>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>Medical setting and voluntary sector</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Eclectic - Humanistic</td>
<td>Older adults and families</td>
<td>Medical setting</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Humanistic</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Educational setting</td>
<td>2</td>
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## Results

### Over-Arching Theme: ‘All the same but different’

– Contradictory Discourse

| Sub-ordinate Theme 1: | - It [disability] is not the disabled person’s problem
- Disability is when the person is not independent
- This [definition of disability] is getting confusing |
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<tr>
<td><strong>Struggling through politics</strong> – with reference to disability politics</td>
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| Sub-ordinate Theme 2: | - You want to be good to them [disabled clients] to make up for their suffering
- It’s not fair that they [disabled people] abuse of their disability
- We [counsellors] need to look at our prejudices and attitudes |
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<td><strong>The deserving and the undeserving</strong> – with reference to disabled people stemming from the social and cultural aspect</td>
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| Sub-ordinate Theme 3: | - Everyone has a disability
- We [counsellors] need to look beyond the disability
- I [counsellor] don’t like labels |
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<tr>
<td><strong>Clinging to professional ideology</strong> – with reference to the training and cultures of practice of counsellors</td>
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Contradictory Discourse

The politics of disability

The social and cultural aspect

Professional training

Tension: Contradictory discourse

Counsellors’ social construction of disability
All the Same but Different – Contradictory Discourse

• All six counsellors were constantly presenting contradictory discourse throughout their individual interviews
  “we are all the same...we all have limitations”
  “I think, disabled or not, everyone has different needs”

• All the participants were having great difficulty with giving an explanation of their understanding of disability.
  “...was he disabled? Today, that you are mentioning this and I remembered him, for me, when I was doing therapy, for me he wasn’t disabled, he was sick. But now thinking about it he was very disabled...I think it was better if you asked me who I think is disabled for you as I don’t know how to answer you...” (Martha)

  “...I think it’s a very complex issue, this thing of disability. It’s not as simple or clear cut...” (Anne)
Struggling with the Politics (1)

“... the person who is hearing impaired it’s not her problem, it’s mine because I, I need to learn her language, you know” (Anne).

“...a society thing, some societies help, some societies don’t ... ...but I think the, the thing that set the ball rolling to me, politically...was feminism.” (Gloria)
“...I mean ‘cos like I say, there is, obviously there are going to be limitations, there are going to be challenges... It’s inevitable that you are going to meet somebody that somehow their life has been, you know, limited by the illness or limited by an accident or something”. (Matthew)

“So, so I think for me disability is when the person is not independent... (sic)” (Gloria)

“...So the way I see it, yes, it [the condition] is limiting me, disabling me from doing my functions” (Paula).
‘The Deserving and the Undeserving’ (1)

“...there is the fear of incompetence because you want to be so good with him, because maybe life, because what he is suffering from, post-trauma I’m saying, that sometimes it’s, it’s, it’s a big challenge to help you to overcome that to be able to give...” (Rose)

“...these people need...they need more empowerment, they need to be more empowered, they need to, they need more support sort of, to a certain extent, to take a decision.” (Paula)
‘The Deserving and the Undeserving’ (2)

“...they get annoyed if the disabled person abuses of their disability because then, ‘listen, if you’re equal, you’re equal’, you’ve been given your time, you’ve been given your toilet, you’ve been given your ramp, now sit down and enjoy the meal, you know, you don’t have to claim that you need a waiter on a one-to-one basis because you have a mouth like me. So then it comes to this point and I think the disabled societies or...have to educate people for this as well. It’s not fair, but it’s not fair to abuse of your disability.” (Gloria) ...” (Gloria)
Clinging to Professional Ideology

“I mean again, you can take disability and you can broaden it, you know at the end of the day I could claim everybody has a disability... I mean I can be disabled simply by the fact that I’m a selfish person, you know...” (Matthew)

“I don’t know how to answer you because I think we all have a form of disability, there’s...all of us have limitations, isn’t that true? Some are...some you can see and some you can’t.” (Martha)

“I don’t like the word ‘disability’. It, it eh...it jars with my... Because I don’t like labels, you know... Unfortunately there are, there are a lot of emm, categories and labels and... which don’t sit comfortably with me. That is a personal issue that I have.” (Anne)
Conclusion

• A need for more awareness about disability issues and the social model of disability amongst counsellors.

• A need for counselling approaches that have the social model of disability as their foundation.

Recommendations:

• To study the experience of disabled people who have made use of counselling services at some point in their lives.


References (2)


References (4)


