

SOCW2003: Introduction to Social Work Counselling and Assessment

Distinction (84) Notes, UNSW Term 1 2026

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Week 1: Intro to SOCW Counselling & Counselling Skills

What is Counselling and Assessment?

- ★ **Counselling + Assessment:** Engages with + responds to the clients' needs
 - Involved in macro and micro SOCW practice → holistic perspective
 - Requires communication + counselling skills

- **Therapeutic relationship:**
 - Positive regard: respect + valuing client → person of worth!
 - Non-judgemental attitude: suspend moral judgements, confronting harmful behaviours (to self + others), seek to understand meaning + origins behind harmful behaviour towards others
 - Genuineness: Non-defensive, natural, sincere, spontaneous, open, real, honest (not necessarily full disclosure), self-disclosure
 - Personal warmth: helps clients feel safe + accepted (verbal and non-verbal)
 - E.g. expression, tone of voice, how questions are asked, eye contact
 - Empathy: capacity to accurately perceive + show understanding of a client's feelings + subjective experience

Approaches to Counselling and Assessment

- ★ **Social Justice Lens:** Human rights + social justice central to intervention
 - Advocates for client's rights whilst addressing social disadvantage
 - SETS SOCW apart
 - **Social context:** used to understand presenting problems
 - Includes family history, class, gender, sexuality, culture, ethnicity, trauma history, current environment (as relevant)
 - Quality of client's personal + social relationships, and their cultural + social reference groups
 - Involvement in legal systems, educational institutions etc.
 - Access to income security, medical services, housing + safety

- ★ **Cultural Lens:** (Miller 2011; Redfern & Bennett 2022)

- Culture + background
- Spirituality
- Racism
- Intersectionality
- Gender
- Sexuality
- Class
- Abilities

★ **Strengths + Resilience:** Framework emphasising pre-existing + continued growth/adaptation/abilities

- Resources, resilience, dignity + self-worth
- Deep listening with cultural support + respect

★ **Systemic Orientation:** Integrates the social systems an individual is a part of (even if they are cut off)

- Holistic view of a 'person in environment' → thinking systemically
 - Focuses perspective onto clients' goals / the purpose of the interaction
- Family system, family, couples, groups/communities, wider systems
- E.g. Eco map (note the below example is only one of many ways to do one)

More available in full notes!

References

- Higham, P. E. (2019) *Communication and interviewing skills for practice in social work, counselling and the health professions*, London: Routledge.
- Miller, L. (2011) *Counselling skills for social work*, 2nd edn., London: SAGE.

Week 4: Conducting a First Session

Basic Roadmap for First Sessions

- Engagement - **'joining' or social stage** (~5–15 mins)
- Explore the client's **main problem or concern**
 - Can be different from the reason for referral!
- Identify **strengths + resilience**
- Identify **desired outcomes + goals**
- Explain **how outcomes may be achieved**
- **Initial support/help** — e.g. your availability, support systems + services
 - Empathy → facilitate client to tell their story
 - Discuss strategies + identify/affirm strengths + hope
- Contracting for **further counselling sessions**

Gibney's (2003) Four Levels of Engagement in Therapeutic Contexts

1. **Negotiation:** Is therapy required, wanted/needed or appropriate in the current circumstances? (Gibney 2003: 81–2 in Harms 2015: 115)
2. **Problem-solving / Solution-focused therapy:** An issue has been identified and the client wants it solved instead of wanting 'understanding or insight' (Gibney 2003: 83 in Harms 2015: 115)
3. **'Nexus of change'** (Gibney 2003: 86 in Harms 2015: 115)
4. **Deep engagement:** transformative with the practitioner as 'an implicated witness' (Gibney 2003: 86 in Harms 2015: 115)

More available in full notes!

Week 5: Multi-Dimensional / Psychosocial Assessment

What is an Assessment?

- **Collaborative, ongoing** process which explores how an individual is functioning (Loughran 2019: 129) → 'problem-solving partnership' (Walker & Beckett 2011 in Loughran 2019: 136)
 - Captures the **diversity and complexity** of a client's life + situation (Harms 2015: 164)
 - Explore risks and strengths—'problem behaviors and possible limitations... [and] strengths and resilience' (Loughran 2019: 134)
- **Formative:** aims to use resources to enhance 'optimal functioning and well-being ... for their inner and outer worlds' (Harms 2015: 163; Loughran 2019: 124)
 - Establishes 'a mutual agenda for future action' (Harms 2015: 163) — 'shared understanding is not the same as agreed understanding' (Loughran 2019: 129)
 - Disagreements are possible → **Explanations + reasoning is key!**
 - **NOTE: information fluid and dynamic** → it can change over time, rapidly or gradually (Harms 2015: 166)

More available in full notes!