Nondirectiveness and Genetic Counseling

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Nondirectiveness is the generally required and professed standard for genetic counseling. However, studies are lacking in the field of human genetics and in other disciplines which address either the theory or practice of this type of therapeutic procedure in the context of genetic counseling. Moreover, there is no indication the further development this concept has undergone in client-centered therapy has been acknowledged in human genetics. This could be due to the historical development of genetic counseling, its inherent conflicts and often undefined goals, and the latent need of human geneticists to defend themselves against being accused of eugenic tendencies. Nondirectiveness and directiveness, however, can neither adequately describe what takes place in genetic counseling, nor can they — according to their original meaning — be used to define an ethical standard of genetic counseling. Starting with the writings by Carl Rogers (1942), an experiential approach is described, in which counseling is seen as a process of influence, which is wished by all the persons involved, during which activities are oriented toward the experience of the client, and which allows the counselor to communicate openly and directly with the client. The present study illustrates the use of the experiential approach in genetic counseling and shows that it can uphold the principle of ethics, which nondirectiveness demands and, at the same time, prevent the inevitable and unresolvable contradictions. This means that in their training genetic counselors must learn to recognize and constantly reflect on the influence they can and want to exert. In order to be able to use this influence in a responsible manner, genetic counselors must also learn to have a certain degree of flexibility so that they are able to check at any time how their client responds to this influence.

KEY WORDS: genetic counseling; nondirectiveness; directiveness; experiential counseling.

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Rezepte schreiben ist leicht, aber im übrigen sich mit den Leuten verständigen ist schwer. (Franz Kafka: Ein Landarzt)

there is a definite tendency for all counselors to consider themselves as being non-coercive and non-directive. (Carl R. Rogers, 1942, p. 125)

INTRODUCTION

According to the survey carried out by Wertz and Fletcher (1989a), more than 75% of all medical geneticists in more than 75% of the countries surveyed consider themselves committed to the principle of nondirectiveness in genetic counseling (Wertz, 1989). For many years this principle has been used in every conceivable context to indicate an ethically responsible approach to the difficulties and consequences of genetic diagnosis. This frequent usage is in striking contrast to the lack of attempts made to provide concept or substance to the term of nondirectiveness in genetic counseling, with the exception of statements to the effect that counsellors should behave in a "neutral" manner and should leave decisions to their patients or clients. Both these statements are, in the final analysis, devoid of content, since it is evident that every patient/client, in the absence of direct physical force, makes up his/her own mind, and "neutral" would have to be defined or conceptualized as similar as "nondirective."3

Some meanings of this term or of a concept of nondirectiveness in connection with genetic counseling could be elucidated from the context in which it is used. Since 1983 more than 2500 works have been published in which the subject of genetic counseling is discussed, yet only four of them take a stand on nondirectiveness or nondirective counseling (Literature research Medline.83). These include two publications of the study on ethics and human genetics of Wertz and Fletcher (Wertz and Fletcher, 1989b, Wertz et al., 1991), one about AIDS (Bayer, 1990), and one about counseling for the deaf (Armos et al., 1991). A search for literature on the subject in other data banks using the search strategy "ethics and (non-) directiveness in genetic counseling" produced a further seven papers which, however, make scant contribution to the conceptualization or content of the term nondirectiveness in genetic counseling: an editorial (Lancet II, 1982), suggesting the ineffectiveness of directive genetic counseling on the

3For example neutrality meaning the exclusion of any subjectivity is an untenable construct which is unrealistic. Franklin (1990) discusses for the psychotherapeutic/psychoanalytic domain 5 different dimensions or aspects of neutrality (behavioural, attitudinal, interpersonal, interactional and essential) all of which have their importance in the different contexts. These different aspects do not, however, represent an objective to be achieved under all circumstances, but are only options which the therapist can more or less approach (Mertens, 1993).