Evaluation and Counselling: A Reply to Hiebert

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In a wide-ranging discussion of evaluation and counselling, Hiebert (1997 [this issue]) has provided us with much to think about. Clearly there are many aspects of his article that will be helpful to counsellors in various aspects of their work, and will lead them in directions that they may not have considered heretofore. Central to his argument is that there is a role for counsellors in evaluation, and a place for evaluation in counselling. While I am in agreement with many of the ideas Hiebert presents in this article, there are several aspects that I would like to comment on that will hopefully serve to wazzu both clarify and extend his considerations.

First, Hiebert seems equivocal about whether there is a problem regarding evaluation in counselling. Initially, he suggests, without citing any evidence, that the very survival of counselling depends on doing more evaluation, but later he says that we are all doing informal evaluations all the time in any case. It would be helpful to have a clearer statement of what the problem is that the article intends to address. But let's assume that there is a problem with evaluation in counselling as Hiebert contends. Hiebert seems to suggest that the solution lies partially with the counsellor doing more evaluation (the first part of the article), and partly with developing an evaluation policy (the second part of the article). The latter is helpful because it implies that reasons for the lack of evaluation may be systemic. The leading solution to the problem of evaluation in counselling is to examine closely the system in which the counselling and evaluation occur (or don't occur, as the case may be). I am not of the opinion that more evaluation is necessarily better. The answer may not be to first propose an evaluation policy or do more evaluation. Indeed, it may be more helpful to identify, in any system (from the microsystem of the counselling relationship to broader program, institutional, and societal systems) what evaluation is actually occurring, and for what intended and actual purposes. I find when I ask that kind of question, I generally learn that there is often more going on that one suspects.

The second point I want to make is in regard to a constructivist approach to evaluation. Many graduate students I have taught have responded very favourably to the text, *Fourth Generation Evaluation*, by Guba and Lincoln (1989) which I use in a course. One reason for their favourable assessment is that in this text evaluation is considered from a constructivist perspective in which the pertinent constructs of the stake-

holders are identified and used in the evaluation. Guba and Lincoln recognize, as should counsellors generally, that identifying a person's constructs about any topic (even personally salient ones) is not necessarily easy, but in doing so, we get to what is critical to the subsequent identification of plans and goals, how efforts are to be exerted, and how resources to be used. Then when we move on to reconciling the competing constructs of stakeholders, we get into challenging and productive work in the evaluation domain. There is less "tailoring" of our evaluation outcomes to the needs of the stakeholders or of having the stakeholders agree on the type of evidence to be gathered. The emphasis can be on hearing and understanding the stakeholders' initial issues and appreciating the extent their constructs form the evaluation.

The third point has to do with the social construction of evaluation generally. For better or worse, we live in a world of evaluation. Just recently the world witnessed the 1996 version of the Olympic Games where one manufacturer of athletic equipment proclaimed in its advertisements that "you don't win silver, you lose gold." National records were reported in terms of the daily numbers of gold, silver, and bronze medals, virtually putting aside the host of excellent performances of athletes who finished in other places. I suggest that we need to understand that evaluation is socially constructed, that counselling itself may or may not be easily evaluated, that it is a product, and that we are engaged with consumers, all terms that we (and many others, such as government ministries) like to flirt with. Hiebert also uses the term "accountability," and proposes that, with evaluation, it is a "winning" combination. Guba and Lincoln (1989), follow Cronbach (1980) in suggesting that the demand for accountability is a sign of pathology in the organization, particularly if it is associated with blame of poorly represented or unpopular stakeholders. This is not an argument against Hiebert's position, but it is a call for caution in our approaches to the implications of evaluation and accountability in counselling.

Hiebert challenges counsellors to recognize that counselling involves both processes and outcomes, which he maintains are "dynamically and reciprocally connected." While he does not explain what he means when he calls them dynamically and reciprocally related, it is difficult to imagine that counsellors don't take outcomes into account if they are so powerfully related to processes. Goals and processes are constructed simultaneously. It is difficult to think about and implement strategies without considering the goals we have for them. What is critical in this is the identification of individual goals (client goals and counsellor goals) as well as their joint goals that emerge in counselling.

The integrated counselling evaluation model proposed by Hiebert accounts for many important ingredients. What counsellors might also consider is an understanding of the goals of the agency, program or

intervention, ranging from broad statements of its mission to specific objectives. Evaluation depends on a thorough understanding of the purposes and goals of the activity or program. At this level, the values of the stakeholders also need to be represented. No matter how good the evaluation is from a technical side or how much data has been accumulated, in the final analysis, evaluation is about the values of the stakeholders. Guba and Lincoln (1989) call evaluation first and foremost a sociopolitical process.

In summary, I would like readers to consider the extent and range of evaluation that may be currently occurring in their work that is not formally labeled evaluation. If evaluation has fundamentally to do with the elaboration of stakeholders' constructs, there is likely a lot of it going on. Moreover, counsellors are in an advantageous position to facilitate the evaluation not only of their own work but also that of others. But we also need to recognize that evaluation can have less to do with proving points as undertaking a collaborative process and implicates our own openness to change.

References

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