

COUNSELLOR COMPETENCIES AND SELECTED ISSUES IN CANADIAN COUNSELLOR EDUCATION

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine, from a comprehensive set of counsellor competencies, those for which there is a relatively high degree of consensus. Competencies were considered to include personal qualities, knowledge, and skills. A second purpose was to determine the degree of consensus with regard to specific issues in counsellor education, such as candidate selection, program content, counsellor educator qualifications, modes of training and directions for the future. A modified Delphi technique was used to gather data. A sample of 304 counsellor educators, counsellor supervisors, practicing counsellors, and counselling students across Canada responded to both phases of the questionnaire. Analysis of the data indicated a high degree of consensus relative to the various competency areas and specific competencies considered necessary for counselling effectiveness, similarly so for most issues pertaining to counsellor education programs. Implications of the results for the design of "Guidelines for Counsellor Education Programs in Canada" and for further research are presented.

Résumé

Le but de cette étude était d'identifier, d'après une série compréhensive de compétences en counselling, celles qui répondraient le plus à un consensus général. Parmi les compétences on trouve les qualités personnelles, la connaissance et les habiletés. Un deuxième but était d'évaluer le degré du consensus par rapport aux questions s'adressant à l'éducation en counselling telles que le choix des candidats, le contenu d'un programme, les qualifications de l'éducation en counselling, des moyens de formation et l'orientation future. On a utilisé une technique Delphi modifiée pour identifier les données. À la pige, on a demandé à 304 éducateurs en counselling, superviseurs en counselling, conseillers praticiens et étudiants en counselling de répondre aux deux parties du questionnaire. L'analyse des données indique un haut degré de consensus par rapport aux divers domaines de compétences et par rapport aux compétences spécifiquement requises pour le counselling efficace. Il en était ainsi pour la plupart des questions se rapportant aux programmes d'éducation en counselling. Cet article présente ce qu'implique les résultats pour la préparation de "Grandes lignes pour les programmes d'éducation en counselling au Canada".

The accelerating need for competent counsellors imposes on the profession a responsibility for effective counsellor education. The Canadian Guidance and Counselling Association has recognized and is accepting its professional responsibility to take steps to assure a level of excellence in counselling. The 1975 resolution to "establish a set of guidelines for counsellor education" reflects a positive action toward "quality" in counselling and a commitment to govern and regulate the profession internally.

A recognition of the need to reexamine counsellor education programs has come largely from within the profession (Bernstein & Lecomte, 1976; Metazzaro, Weins, & Laslow, 1966; Rogers, 1956; Sprinthall & Erickson, 1973; Whiteley, 1969). Stigall (1977, p. 4) stated, "What is needed

is a greater degree of consensus among training programs, credentialing authorities, and practitioners as to the minimum standards for professional preparation of psychologists." This study addressed that need on the Canadian scene in an attempt to focus on two questions implied in the CGCA resolution: (a) what are the competencies required of an effective counsellor, and (b) assuming that these can be determined, what guidelines for counsellor education programs would best promote their development?

A review of literature relevant to counsellor characteristics, counsellor competencies, and counsellor training programs was undertaken. Following is a synopsis of the findings.

1. There is an increasing trend toward certification and licensure in the helping professions.

In an era of accountability, there is a need to decide what counselling is, how it is done, and how success is gauged.

2. Counsellor education programs have been severely criticized. The comment of Sprinthall and Erickson (1973) is not atypical:

Too often one could find no particular rationale for the courses offered, no means to assess the impact of training experience and no coherence or internal reliability and validity to curriculum sequence. Most of which passes for counsellor education seemed based on conventional wisdom. (p. 21)

3. A reluctance to define counselling has been a serious obstacle to training, evaluation, and research in the field.
4. Professional organizations have devoted much effort to the development of standards for the preparation of counsellors. The focus of these efforts, however, has been largely on the philosophy, objectives, curriculum, and resources of the training institutions. Little attention has been given to the expected competencies of the "well-trained" counsellor which these institutions purport to produce.
5. Recently, serious attempts have been made to identify the skills or competencies required of the counsellor. A.P.G.A. publications on "standards", the development of competency-based programs, and the increasing number of articles which attempt to grapple with the complexities of determining, developing, and assessing competency reflect this trend. Research supporting this trend, however, is meagre. Until required competencies are identified, counsellor education will continue to be a "hit and miss" process and the counsellor educator will have no solid grounds on which to develop methods or assess outcomes.
6. The most rational position at this time is to say that "the best way to train counsellors is not known." A wide variety of academic and practical content exists in various counselling programs throughout North America. Little research is available to indicate the value of specific courses or experiences as preparation for specific counselling settings or specific counselling tasks. Some consideration must be given the development of a "core" curriculum as a foundation for the various counselling specialities.
7. There is no dictionary of counsellor education — no common agreement as to the meaning of "counsellor", "counselling", "practicum", "internship", or "supervision".
8. The trend toward competency-based rather than course-based or discipline-based pro-

grams is gaining momentum. Competency-based programs specify the basic role functions of the counsellor and the competencies (specific knowledge and skill) required for these role functions.

9. There is growing acceptance that selection criteria for candidates to counselling programs must include personal characteristics as well as the ability to master academic requirements. Unfortunately, state Shertzer and Stone (1974, p. 126), "At the present time, the counselling profession is unable to demonstrate consistently that a single trait or pattern of traits distinguishes an individual who is or will be a 'good' counsellor."
10. Little is known regarding the counsellor educator. Challenging questions regarding counsellor educators remain unanswered.
11. A trend, supported by some research, toward a didactic supervisory style for training counsellors, as opposed to a counselling style, is developing. However, most writing on supervision has been of a theoretical nature and little has been done to measure the effects of different approaches on counsellor performance.
12. As yet, no satisfactory evaluation model for assessing the performance of counsellors-in-training, counsellor supervision, or counsellor education programs is available. Consequently, consistency in standards is not possible, nor is comparative research facilitated.
13. Serious questions must be raised regarding the conclusions which can be derived from current research in counselling. Burck, Cottingham, and Reardon (1973, p. 126) state, "The history of research in counselling has been ridden with ill-conceived, oversimplified, poorly designed studies." A clear cut, methodologically sound, and sufficiently general paradigm which could guide investigations has not emerged. Major and persistent problems in sampling, design, criterion selection and measurement pose a substantial challenge to the research.

In the preparation of guidelines for counsellor education programs it is important to consider the available data relating to both the product (the effective, competent counsellor) and the process (counsellor education) of counselling programs. Research has provided some insights into the competencies (knowledge, skills, qualities) of the effective counsellor, although for the most part the relative priority of such competencies has not been established. With regard to the issues of counsellor education, considerable variation in what is recommended as effective is evident. In other words, a review of literature suggests that there is no

research-based consensus sufficient to provide clear cut guidelines as to the nature of the effective counsellor education program.

Method

A modified Delphi technique was used to gather data. The Delphi technique is a method for eliciting and refining the judgements of a group of people on a particular topic using a set of carefully designed sequential questionnaires interspersed with summarized information and feedback of opinions derived from earlier responses. In practise the procedure is used with a group of experts or especially knowledgeable individuals.

An initial draft of the questionnaire was designed by reviewing the competencies of a counsellor and the issues in counsellor education suggested by literature, research, APA guidelines, existing competency-based programs, and brochures of Canadian programs. Throughout the designing task the intention was to identify core competencies of a counsellor rather than those specific to a particular setting. Feedback from five counsellor educators, five doctoral students, and five masters students, all with considerable counselling experience, was solicited as to the format and the relative importance of each proposed category and item. The revisions resulted in a Phase I questionnaire consisting of 203 items within 20 categories pertaining to counsellor competencies and counsellor training. A 7-point ranking scale was selected to force respondents to prioritize items and thus avoid all items being given a relatively strong emphasis. Phase I was mailed to 800 respondents. Three hundred and eighty-one responded. A Phase-II questionnaire provided feedback in the form of the mean ranking and related comments for each item responded to in Phase I. Three hundred and four respondents answered both questionnaires.

Sample

It is logical that the determination of counsellor education guidelines take into account the opinions of those persons qualified, by virtue of background, experience, or study, to offer an informed opinion. Counsellor educators, practising counsellors, supervisors of counselling services, members of the Canadian Guidance and Counselling Association, and counselling students were considered to qualify. Practising counsellors included counsellors from education systems, colleges, and universities, and "others" (e.g., private practise).

The sample was professionally well prepared as indicated by the high percentage of respondents who had earned masters or doctoral degrees and the high average number of years of experience. Also, the relatively high percentage who held

memberships in professional associations other than CGCA contributes to an image of high professional interest and concern.

Results and Discussion

It was hypothesized that feedback at Phase II would foster convergence in rankings; consequently, the average standard deviation of ranks on Phase II would be less than that on Phase I.

A two-way analysis of variance was conducted to determine the amount of variability in the standard deviation of item ranks which could be attributed to Occasion, Group, and Occasion-by-Group interaction. The results of this analysis, reported in Table 1, indicate that the feedback information on the second questionnaire did, in fact, foster consensus among the experts ($p < .0001$).

Table 1
Analysis of Variance of Average Standard Deviations of Ranks Assigned to Items

	Source	MS	df	F
Between	Time	45.95	1	173.28**
	Group	1.78	5	6.72**
	Interaction	.59	5	2.25*
Within		.265	1452	

** $p < .0001$.

* $p < .05$.

Opinions

General areas. The sample evidenced remarkable consensus as to the relative importance of the different categories of competencies necessary for training an effective counsellor. Specifically the question read, "Rank the general areas which you believe to be most important to the training of an effective counsellor." In decreasing order of importance the areas were ranked: self-awareness (6.0), personal characteristics (5.5), counselling skills and techniques (5.1), theoretical background (3.6), professional/ethical conduct (3.0), consulting and coordinating (1.8), measurement techniques (1.1), information services (1.1), evaluation and research abilities (0.7).

Only minor differences among groups were indicated on these general categories. Students preferred skills over characteristics. Supervisors ranked coordinating and consulting higher than higher education counsellors and, although evaluation and research skills were ranked last by all groups, counsellor educators ranked them significantly more valuable than education system counsellors.

Self-awareness. The issue of self-awareness has been a controversial one in the training of counsellors. An adequate definition is absent from the literature. The results of the section, however, give some content to the concept. The first six items —

awareness of values and attitudes, competencies, needs/wants/aspirations, personal impact, emotional reactions, and personal limits — appear to be the essential components of the kind of self-awareness which is essential to the counsellor. There was consensus across groups as to the relative importance of each component. Higher education counsellors, however, emphasized values and attitudes significantly more than all other groups.

Various attempts in the last decade to include training for self-awareness in counsellor education programs have been less than totally successful. Psychological education models are now appearing as the newest effort to develop self-awareness. Based on principles of effective teaching, they have a reasonable potential for effectiveness.

In summary, there is a high value and high agreement on self-awareness and the items or components therein. Longstanding controversies such as the usefulness in selection, means of assessing, and means of developing need to be clarified. The apparent degree of consensus strongly suggests that this area warrants increased attention and careful investigation.

Personal characteristics. Personal characteristics ranked second among all categories as important for effectiveness to counselling. All groups included tolerant, mature, respectful, intuitive, positive, and flexible among their highest six descriptors. Only minor variations occurred in the ranking of the remaining characteristics — self-caring, sense of humor, self-directing, risk-taking, nondefensive, rational-objective, creative, prompt-dependable, inquiring attitude.

As discussed in the review of literature, considerable effort has yielded no personal characteristic or set of characteristics which are desired of counsellors. Since personal characteristics ranked second in overall importance to effective counselling, it is logical to continue investigation into the nature of personal characteristics of the counsellor and the relationship to his/her credibility, public regard, and effectiveness.

Counselling skills and techniques. The general area of skills ranked third overall. Interestingly, skills were ranked higher than theoretical knowledge. It could be assumed that if a person has the skill they understand the principles on which it is based. However, this is not necessarily so. Equally valid is the interpretation that it is more important to know how to do something than to understand why it works. It might be noted that knowing "how" is the sign of a technician, knowing "how" and "why", the sign of a professional.

All groups agreed on the importance of the need for establishing rapport, effectively using interpersonal responses, goal setting and contract-

ing, and role playing. It is important to notice that all groups agreed on the top four techniques. Rankings of the remaining skills tended to be setting specific. Comments suggested that specific techniques are learned with experience and are relative to client needs and problems and to the settings in which the counsellor works.

Theoretical background. This section included fields of study and counselling approaches. Developmental psychology, communication, and psychology of personality were ranked 1, 2, and 3 by all groups. Group and family dynamics, the psychology of learning, and vocational psychology and decision-making were included as the next three priorities but in varying order. Organizational development and statistics and research design unanimously occupied the lowest priorities. Most counsellor training programs offer a limited number of theoretical courses which could be designated as "required." The question becomes, "Which theoretical fields of study yield the most appropriate background for counselling effectiveness?"

The preferred approaches were: client centered, systems approach, reality, behavior modification, cognitive behavioral, gestalt, Adlerian, transactional analysis, rational emotive, existential, psychoanalytic, logotherapy, and trait and factor.

Preference for particular approaches appeared to be setting specific. There was relatively strong agreement as to the approaches which would receive least emphasis. It is not possible to know if we have a record of "what is" or "what should be" (i.e., what is congenial to the counsellor versus what is effective with the client). Systems approach, which ranked second only to the classic client centered, was strongly controversial.

Professional/ethical conduct. Unlike a major American study that ranked professional/ethical conduct the most important component of effective counsellor training, the Canadian sample ranked it fourth. Any explanation for the difference would amount to speculation.

Consulting and coordinating. The consulting/coordinating role may become increasingly important in an era of accountability. There is a demand for the services of the counsellor to reach more persons for fewer dollars. The question of role becomes important here. What does a counsellor do? The era of one-to-one counselling may be on the decline although the sample on the first phase ranked one-to-one counselling the most important function for which counsellors must be prepared. The counsellor of today, indeed, the counselling profession of today, will increasingly find difficulty defending the validity of an insular role away from the mainstream of the lives of the persons she/he works with.

CGCA defines "counsellor" as inclusive of "all persons engaged in providing education, vocation, placement, personal and any other kind of services in the field of guidance to the public." Consulting would appear to justifiably fall within the category of "any other kind of service in the field of guidance."

Counsellor functions. Related to the competencies of an effective counsellor is the question, "Which functions are important for counsellors to be prepared to perform?" All groups agreed on the importance of two primary functions; personal/social counselling and career/vocational/educational counselling. In descending order of importance, the other functions included: psychological education/group guidance, crisis counselling, family counselling, providing personally relevant information, consulting with staff, family and friends of client, program development and evaluation, staff development, and conducting research studies. It appears perceived role is related to importance of counselling function. Although little difference existed in the overall ranking of functions, each group did appear to have an emphasis. Career/vocational/ educational was ranked significantly different by higher education counsellors (5.5) than by counsellor educators (4.3) or students (4.1). Family counselling was ranked significantly higher by students (3.5) than by educators (2.5), supervisors (2.3), and higher education counsellors (1.8). Higher education counsellors (3.3) saw providing personally relevant information as more important than counselling students (1.7) and counsellor educators (2.0) and consulting as less important (1.9) than counsellor educators (2.9). Counsellor educators ranked consulting significantly higher (2.5) than higher education counsellors (1.9). Supervisors ranked staff development significantly higher than all other groups with the exception of students. However, it was ranked ninth of 10 functions by all groups. Assessment was not suggested as a function at all. This gives rise to serious consideration of the time spent training counsellors in the assessment/diagnostic function.

Measurement techniques. Measurement techniques were considered a relatively low priority by all groups. Many comments expressed caution about the abuse of tests. There were numerous suggestions that diagnosis and testing be a function performed by the psychometrist. Others suggested, however, that even though the counsellor may prefer not to be involved in testing, some knowledge of testing is imperative as there is an assumption on the part of colleagues that trained colleagues are well versed in statistical interpretation. The relatively high priorities on interest and aptitude tests and educational diagnostic tests suggests the two main functions for which assess-

ment is being used by counsellors — career/vocational/education counselling and assessment for placement or remedial help. The relative importance of the specific techniques appears to be setting specific. With the exception of sociometric techniques, groups differed significantly on every item.

Informational areas. Respondents judged the need for information to be of the same relative importance as the ability to use measurement techniques. Difference among groups was observed on five items. The items in informational areas are particularly setting related. In descending order of importance the items given considerable emphasis were: occupational/vocational/educational, the role of the counsellor, information about effective interpersonal relationships, data gathering and disseminating techniques, referral agencies, job search information, and occupational life styles, and nature of work setting.

The data also suggest that there is general agreement that the social or community life of the client is not within the realm of concern of the counsellor.

Research and evaluation skills. The generally low priority on research skills is consistent with the results of a large American study (Menne, 1974). The comment, "It is unfortunate if counsellors do not continuously do some research or even keep abreast of current research," and "involvement with research is an excellent means of continuously sharpening and updating counselling skills, thereby continuing one's professional education" (p. 47), is apparently unheard by the Canadian counsellor as well. There appears to be strong recognition of the need to evaluate one's own individual and program effectiveness, the importance of assessing needs, and the importance of making use of new findings. The ability to evaluate one's own effectiveness received the second highest mean of all items in the study.

Counsellor education policies. In descending order of priority, the policies considered most important were: a set of objectives consistent with a stated philosophy, a philosophy of counselling, program evaluation procedures, a philosophy of counsellor education, a student selection procedure, scope of the program, contents of core curriculum, a staff selection procedure, a student evaluation procedure, the nature of the student-advisor relationship, staff evaluation procedure, and research priorities. The only item which differentiated groups was that of staff evaluation. Counsellor educators ranked it significantly lower than counselling students. It appears students recommend more assessment of staff than do educators themselves.

Candidate selection criteria. This category combined both process and criteria. The process or

procedures favored were a personal interview, letters of recommendation, a group experience with instructors, and a specifically designed counselling admissions exam. Group experiences for selection are uncommon but growing in popularity for final selection. The development of a specifically designed counselling admissions examination may deserve effort. It would incorporate aspects of the suggested criteria and be used initially only as one prediction of success.

In descending order, the criteria for selection were awareness of self; beliefs, values, and attitudes; work experiences; entering behavior; and grade point average. Undergraduate major, results of selected personality/aptitude instruments, research experience, and graduate record exam received mean rankings and standard deviations so low as to suggest they are not meaningful criteria. Two items differentiated groups. In both cases counsellor educators differed significantly from all other groups. They ranked awareness of self lower than all other groups and grade point average higher.

Counsellor educator selection. Very little is known about the counsellor educator — virtually nothing about the Canadian counsellor educator (Scott, 1971). The characteristic ranked most important in selecting a counsellor educator was “proficiency in counselling.” This would suggest that the counsellor educator be an effective counsellor and that the effectiveness of the counsellor educator is related to his/her effectiveness as a counsellor. The ability to teach and supervise was rated considerably lower. This raises the question as to whether the role of the counsellor educator is that of a counsellor or a teacher. Recent trends in the supervisory relationship place an increasing emphasis on the teaching function.

In order of preference and with virtually no disagreement among groups, the ability to relate, ability to teach and supervise, substantial experience, knowledge of relevant theory and practice, leadership in the field, doctoral degree, and the ability to conduct research were the other criteria for counsellor educator selection.

Modes of training. Assuming the competencies of an effective counsellor can be identified, ways by which to achieve them are necessary. The four most important training modes — supervised practicum, core curriculum, personal growth experiences, and micro-training, paralleled the four most important areas of training — self-awareness, characteristics, skills and knowledge. Field experience and an internship ranked higher than effective student-advisor relationship which appears relatively low considering the ability to relate was ranked the second most important criterion for counsellor educators. Greater concern for

specialized training or for the provision of options appears unfounded. A strong practical and theoretical core is suggested. The emphasis on research, and in some cases testing, presently visible in Canadian programs may well be reassessed given the consistently low rankings associated with any aspect of research and assessment.

Directions for the future. There is obvious controversy as to the most productive direction for the future. However, only two items differentiated groups. Five directions emerge for the future — theory, research, service, counsellor education, and public image. The development of a general theory and approach to counselling ranked first, reflecting a trend toward focusing on commonalities rather than differences in the various approaches. The fact that research on counselling effectiveness and competencies ranked second and third suggests the profession is not yet satisfied that the components and behaviors of counselling effectiveness have been identified. The high value placed on establishing professional credibility (ranked fourth) and low value placed on certification (ranked eleventh) raises questions as to how the profession might best achieve public recognition. The desire to achieve public recognition and the desire to provide a public service is reflected in the requests for training in effective career education, involvement in human issues, and psychological education. Call for such practical training complements the call for competency-based programming, evaluation criteria, and research on counsellor education effectiveness.

Conclusion

This study involved both an experimental and a policy research component. The experimental component consisted of gathering data to test the hypothesis that the Delphi technique promotes a convergence of informed opinion. The data gathered strongly supports this hypothesis. This finding suggests that the Delphi method of polling opinions may enable professional organizations like C.G.C.A. to achieve the consensus of membership required for policy-making and concerted action.

By far the major thrust of the study, however, may be appropriately described as policy research. The opinions of several groups, each having a vested interest in the training of counselling psychologists, were surveyed to provide a substantive data base for the development of guidelines for counselor education.

Analysis of the data indicate a high degree of consensus regarding the relative importance of various competency areas and the specific competencies considered necessary for counselling effectiveness and for most issues pertaining to counsel-

lor education programs. It must be emphasized, however, that the data collected consisted of informed opinions rather than empirically tested "knowledge."

The counselling profession has no equivalent of the philosopher king of Plato's ideal world who possessed complete authoritative knowledge and unquestioned power to legislate policy. There is simply not available at this time a body of unequivocal "knowledge" consisting of empirically tested and demonstrable principles of effectiveness upon which to base a counsellor education program. With the above consideration in mind, a democratically organized professional group must necessarily use the informed opinions and consent of its members as the base for its policy decisions.

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