

RESEARCH IN COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY: CHANGING EMPHASES IN A CANADIAN PERSPECTIVE

CONRAD LECOMTE

Université de Montréal

FLORENT DUMONT

McGill University

HARVEY W. ZINGLE

University of Alberta

Abstract

This article defines counselling psychology and the factors which shaped its development. It then presents a brief survey of contemporary research in this discipline within a tripartite schema: remediation, developmental counselling, and prevention. Methodological issues are then addressed that focus on designs and trends; this forms the basis for establishing principles of, and formulating concrete suggestions for future research. Finally, within a Canadian context, operational research support is assessed, recommendations for areas of expanded research are offered, and proposals for broader operational support are presented.

Counselling psychology is a discipline that traces its roots back to the vocational guidance movement which sprang up in the United States at the beginning of the 20th century. It was generated by a massive influx of immigrants to the East Coast who were in desperate need of direction relative to work as well as schooling. The response to this need came from both the private and public sectors as significant numbers of educators and political leaders became sensitive to the social disorder and pathology as well as the individual suffering that resulted from not providing help of an institutional nature to such individuals, especially when they were agglomerated in large urban centres.

From these beginnings a discipline emerged. Its practitioners and theorists developed a body of knowledge that was nourished by the mental measurements movement as well as by developmental and career psychology. Like other disciplines within the mental health field, counselling psychology has drawn liberally for its theoretical underpinnings from the various social sciences, not excluding, of course, various sub-specializations of psychology itself.

Counselling psychology: a definition and description

Reprint requests should be sent to Conrad Lecomte, Département de psychologie, Université de Montréal, C.P. 6128, Montréal, Qué. H3C 3J7.

Counselling psychology can be defined as a specialty whose practitioners help people improve their psychological well-being, resolve crises, and increase ability to solve problems and make decisions. Counselling psychologists assume that human problems and their solutions lie in the interaction of personal and environmental forces. Counselling psychologists conduct research, apply interventions, and evaluate services in order to prevent and remedy developmental, educational, emotional, social, and vocational problems (American Psychological Association, 1981).

The following principles are widely accepted as integral to this discipline, shaping and "in-forming" the varieties of helping strategies that are offered to its clientele, directing its research, and structuring its training programs.

The professional endeavour is essentially a psycho-educational one in which problems-living are construed less as illnesses or symptoms of illnesses than as emotional, cognitive, and behavioral deficits. The perspective of the practitioner is hygiological rather than pathological.

Solutions to complex life problems reside in the interaction of environmental forces and intrapsychic dynamics. Counselling psychologists teach individuals, singly or in groups, the skills necessary to understand, evaluate, and

successfully manage the environmental forces which influence their development, as well as their emotional and behavioral responses to these forces. This same enabling endeavour pertains when these practitioners work with a social system, such as a family, a teaching staff, a class of students, or an operating-room nursing staff.

Persons are always moving through developmental life phases requiring decision-making and problem-solving skills appropriate to those phases. The tailoring of interventions, therefore, is made in function of the client's level of maturity, developmental needs, and life-tasks.

A principal goal of the counselling psychologist is to help people develop their own strategies for coping with present and future problems and challenges. The therapeutic outcome for this clientele is enhanced self-reliance and autonomy, freeing them from the long-term tutelage of professionals. Heightened intentionality in clients is an outcome that is sought in counselling. It ensures that they acquire an understanding of the "logic" that one must endure (or enjoy) the consequences of one's own behaviors, as well as accept responsibility for them and that, further, these behaviors are not without significance to others in one's environment.

The praxis-theory dichotomy in counselling psychology has not exhibited the divergence one may find in other disciplines. They are closely interlocked, for the theoretical expressions of this field have been formulated by professionals, by and large, who have worked much of their lives in schools, employment settings, community and university mental health centers. Further, this discipline has traditionally used psychological constructs that have high-level specificity, have been carefully operationalized, and are thereby more amenable to quantitative analysis than the constructs elaborated in more medically-oriented models of psychotherapy (for an extensive discussion of this issue, see Marx, 1969).

The research hypotheses which have been tested by counselling psychologists have, by and large, been closely tied to the perceived needs of their constituents and the ambient society. For example, it is not by chance that a significant part of the published research of Canadian counselling psychologists, appearing in both American and Canadian journals, bears on problems relating to education and career-

planning which typically emerge in secondary school populations.

A review of the literature by Krumboltz, Becker-Haven, and Burnett (1979) paints a canvas of research studies that provides us with a useful conceptual framework to analyze the field of counselling in Canada. The research emphases are consistent with the traditional domains of responsibility of counselling psychologists. The objectives for these domains are roughly as follows.

Helping individuals negotiate the "crises" which appear in successive life phases. The counselling psychologist provides interventions of an educational character that support the total personal development of his/her client. He/she teaches strategies for making optimal career and other life decisions. This is done in the larger counselling context of promoting the individual's adjustment to his/her family and social ambience as well as to his personal endowments and needs.

Altering maladaptive behaviors. Many of the difficulties that drive persons to seek help from counsellors, have their genesis in self-defeating, disorganized, and maladaptive behaviors. These difficulties may be compounded by the reactive effects of an unaccommodating if not destructive environment. Although counselling psychology has a well-developed armamentarium of clinical techniques appropriate to its own orientation, it utilizes strategies from cognate mental health professions.

Preventing problems and conduct disorders in individuals (and populations) at risk. By providing "anticipatory educational interventions", counselling psychologists help parents, educators, and administrators, among others, to modify environments over which they exercise some control, in view of minimizing the stresses and pathogens that promote dysfunctional or inefficient behavior.

Research in counselling psychology

Counselling psychologists have engaged in basic and applied research in 1) counselling process and outcomes, 2) development of tests and assessment techniques, 3) models of personal and social change, 4) person-environment interaction models, 5) career education and decision-making (Pepinsky, 1978). One of the most urgent imperatives for this discipline has been to determine which of its specific strategies for assisting people, whether they be in

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nursery schools or universities, private fee-supported clinics or public tax-supported institutions, are most effective. Research resulting in definitive knowledge of counselling outcomes is still wanting. Furthermore, relatively little is known of how counselling changes occur. While there has been no major breakthrough in our understanding of how the process works, some crucial variables are examined. Instead of comparing large, unspecific systems of counselling or psychotherapy, researchers are trying to define the multidimensionality of change (Lambert & Bergin, 1978) and to take into account elements across theoretical orientations. One important effect of these studies has been that it has led us to reconsider the way we pose our research questions about processes and outcomes. We have come to realize that research in human behavior is essentially relativistic and pluralistic.

There are two logical sequelae to be inferred from the foregoing. First, if there are some active ingredients, beyond nonspecific variables (among which is the placebo), that are operative in the therapeutic and counselling endeavour it will require some research that is remarkable for its "conceptual clarity, methodological rigour, and inventiveness" to reveal them (Rachman & Wilson, 1980, p. 230). The second is implicit and less obvious. The practitioners of each discipline have a coercive bias in favor of the approaches in which they have been trained. The statement of Estes (1957, p. 617) is instructive in this regard.

"In his own experience, the writer has found that the steepest obstacle to theory construction in psychology is not the complexity of behavior. It is the mountain of stereotypes deposited by centuries of pre-scientific attempts to comprehend behavior and capped by the pronouncements of the academicians who have always known in advance, apparently by divine inspiration, exactly what kind of theory is possible and proper for psychology. This barrier must be undermined by uncertainty before it can be toppled by experiment. Once it is down, our experimental subjects will be able to tell us, through the medium of their behavior, what kind of theory psychology is entitled to."

Our need would seem, therefore, to be to do research in view of building more cogent, elegant, and heuristic models and theories of healthy human development and counselling as much as to conduct research presenting yet

more "facts" about current techniques. It is in that perspective that we wish the following to be interpreted.

There are a number of schemata for categorizing the activities being researched in the field of counselling psychology. We have chosen to report our summaries according to the schema used in the *Annual Review of Psychology* (Krumboltz, Becker-Haven, & Burnett, 1979). Accordingly, we will focus on selected recent literature and research in 1) the remediation of maladaptive behavior, 2) counselling in career, educational, and other critical life decisions, and 3) the prevention of problems related to "1" above.

Remediation

Remediation is reported upon first not because it is deemed most important but because it has attracted the most attention in the last decade (an emphasis which seems to be waning), and, indeed, has been more generously funded than other sectors dealing with matters of public, mental health. It should be noted that a number of influential studies of a review nature are available to the reader which are impossible to synopsise here (see, e.g. Smith & Glass, 1977, who have proposed a "meta-analysis" of outcome studies and Luborsky, Singer, & Luborsky, 1975, who provided a good review of psycho-therapeutic outcome research). These numerous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of psychotherapy and counselling interventions in helping people resolve an extensive range of problems.

Research activities in the area of counselling interventions have been rather productive. Counselling strategies have been demonstrated to be effective with school children whose conduct disorders are disruptive to classmates as well as self-incapacitating. Behavior modification techniques have held pride of place in this regard and are widely used by counsellors in the schools (O'Leary & O'Leary, 1976). More research, however, is needed to enable children to internalize the values and controls which find expression in the classroom but not in the home or community at large (Thoresen, Kirit-Gray, & Crosbie, 1977). More effective consultation procedures need to be developed for the counselling psychologist who works with teachers and other child-concerned community leaders. That consultation bears not only on teaching methods that enhance the "self-management of conduct problems" (Rich & Schroeder, 1976) but also on programs that

psychologists work with populations "at risk" who need help, less to remediate actual problems than to prevent future ones. They are not employed in large numbers to do that. Nor, as a consequence, does it appear that, in large numbers, they seek funding to do research in this area. The discipline relies to a great extent on the research efforts of other professionals (which is not in itself undesirable) to assess the pathologizing impact of environmental factors on their clients. But there is a deplorable hiatus in our concern as well as in our research literature with regard to effective strategies and programs for counselling specifically with the following foci: 1) early childhood, 2) social systems such as the family and the school, 3) proactive crisis intervention, 4) consultation and indirect services for administrators, teachers, and "middle-management" personnel, 5) the epidemiology of conduct disorders and mental problems (Cowen, 1973).

The variables that affect the well-being of individuals are often unsuspected and remote. Given the neglect that has afflicted this dimension of counselling, it may not be inappropriate to cite in somewhat more detail a couple of examples. From a recent study done by Laukaran and Van den Berg (1980), it appears that the "wantedness of the pregnancy" is related to maternal and foetal well-being. Those mothers who reported unwanted pregnancies also made more frequent complaints of a psychosocial nature in a prenatal clinic, were more prone to accidental injury during pregnancy, and requested more analgesics during labor. Related findings were reported by Matejcek, Dyttrych, and Schuller (1979) in a study done by the Psychiatric Research Institute in Prague. Two hundred and twenty (220) children whose mothers had been denied requests for the abortion of those infants were matched with a control sample of children whose mothers had not requested an abortion. They were monitored over time on an array of developmental dimensions and age-graded tasks. Significant differences were in evidence when the children were 9 years of age. The initially unwanted children had on average lower school grades, a higher incidence of hospitalization, poorer social integration among age-mates, less tolerance for frustration, and other indications of poor social adaptation.

These and corroborative studies indicate that perceptual, linguistic, and motivational variables that facilitate cognitive as well as socio-emotional development of the child are seriously engaged by parental attitudes and consequent behaviors. It would seem that it

is at an early stage of human development that mental health professionals should intervene to preclude the environmental insult to vulnerable organisms which enhances the probabilities that they will need costly remediative counselling in their more mature years (Deutsch, Katz, & Jean, 1968).

In our society, adaptation to school is a critical stepping stone to many later life adaptations (Glidewell & Swallow, 1969). Failure to adapt is frequent. Yet relatively little is known about this phenomenon and its consequences (Levine & Graziano, 1976). The need for innovative research projects in the prevention of school maladaptiveness is apparent to those close to this scene. More projects like the Primary Mental Health Project (Cowen, Trost, & Lorion, 1975), which provides indirect counselling through consultation with teachers, parents, and children are needed. This project has resulted in a reduction of the frequency and severity of behavior problems at a low cost. Further, research is needed to develop constructive developmental and preventive counselling of couples, families, school staffs to alleviate psychological stress especially for the child who in the home is pathologized by marital discord, overcrowding, parental cruelty, prolonged illness, financial hardship and deprivation, among many factors (Dumont, 1981).

Supporting and encouraging preventive research activities which seek both to forestall dysfunction by reducing rates of occurrence of disorder over long periods of time and to promote psychological health and well-being, could very well be the best investment of money and time that a society can make.

Concluding note

The counselling psychologist has been defined as engaging in three major roles: remediation, human development, and prevention, through research and practice. In essence, it is important to underline that in these three functions counselling psychologists offer the unique contribution of stressing a psychoeducational approach where skills acquisition and dissemination are central. Counselling psychologists have developed through research and practice systematic strategies and skills that they utilize differentially in prevention, remediation and developmental tasks. Counselling psychology is thus a systematic process where specific procedures and skills, e.g. communication, life-planning, decision-making, parent-

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training, problem-solving, relaxation, among others are used differentially with clients. As a result, the teaching of these skills is becoming increasingly important. This discipline has grown over the past decade and our ability to make significant changes in clients and client environments has increased (Ivey, 1976).

Methodological issues

To generate counselling knowledge based on research that springs from highly theoretical, even hypothetico-deductive, systems is not always an undesirable objective. Yet, when scientific research in an area like education is remote or separate from practice, it becomes important to raise questions not only about the research designs employed but the content of the research itself (Bergin, 1963). This is especially true if, as has been suggested by Stake (1969), educational research is becoming functionally autonomous from the practice of education. An examination of these issues in terms of salient features of current research methodologies may provide some cues to our understanding of the following question: "How can we proceed to close the research-practice gap and enhance the scientific productivity and utility of our research endeavours?"

Research designs: trends and problems

When one scans the literature, a number of questions come to mind that reflect the diversity of research conceptualization that informs the field (Garfield, 1978). For example 1) given the laboratory-field setting continuum which can furnish one measure of the rigour and data-hardness of a study, where should the preponderance of our efforts be situated? 2) should more small-sample studies be done or should we move toward ever-larger group designs? 3) need we expand the traditional notions of scientific methodology? 4) should research be more basic or more applied?

To elaborate briefly on one of these questions: some critics continue to exhort their colleagues to do well-controlled laboratory studies (Strong, 1971) and find less precise quasi-experimental research as only a more or less respectable prelude to "real" scientific study (Kiesler, 1971). A countervailing view is promoted by Goldman (1978) who asserts that, granted the virtues of the laboratory, only field-type studies can furnish veridical insights and generalizations about human beings.

An important debate in counselling re-

search circles focusses on the increasing use of research methods other than the traditional and correlational approaches (Cronbach, 1957). This trend seems to be characterized by terms like naturalistic, idiographic, practical, relevant, applied. In any event they are subjective and qualitative and give us soft signs of therapeutic, behavioral change. It has been suggested by others (e.g., Stake, 1969; Harrison, 1970) that scientific research based on traditional methods has been alien, divorced from school operations and the educational enterprise generally. Continuing in this stream are Burck and Peterson (1975) who assert that traditional methods of inquiry are not needed, but rather evaluation of programs. Given these objectives a number of research procedures are promoted; quasi-experimental designs (Cook & Campbell, 1979); the use of unobtrusive measures (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 1966); the formative evaluation model (Scriven, 1967); the "n = 1" design, and time series design where patterns of change are observed and measured over time (Hersen & Barlow, 1979).

What do these controversies imply for researchers in counselling? First they would be well-advised to remain open-minded on methodological options (Zingle, 1976). The assertion of the superiority of one research strategy over another is temerarious to say the least. What needs to be justified is the fit between the particular problem and the specific research procedures chosen to address it. Further, the kinds of questions most useful for grappling with various kinds of theoretical constructs when used at various levels of specificity need to be examined (Gelso, 1979). Again, it becomes important to determine what kind of design provides optimal probative force for the problem under consideration. Counselling research must utilize a variety of design options, given the protean character of its treatment modalities and the variety of its clientele. Exclusive use of any design and specific data analysis strategy guarantees reductionist perspectives and self-fulfilling expectations. The multiple paradigms operating in our field are, in fact, just an accurate reflection of the complexity of the human being and his social organizations. A pluralistic and relativistic perspective in the study of human behavior is, in fact, a sign of methodological maturity in research (Lecomte, 1980).

Summary remarks on methodology

Much has happened during the last decade in our understanding of how science gets done

by scientists (Lakatos, 1970; Mahoney, 1976) and what constitutes scientific theory and research (Popper, 1972). Rigid notions about "true experiments", "valid statistical strategies", and "objective data" once considered to be absolute, if not self-evident, have been relegated to a "relativist" status (Thoresen, 1978). These theoreticians seek to increase our sense of trust by cultivating our doubts in a systematic and responsible fashion (Campbell, 1973). Research methods do not exist independent of the phenomena under study (to pick up a thread from above). Within this perspective, Kraemer (1981) underscores the fact that classical (and elementary) approaches to design and research analysis are frequently based on expectations of the behavior of subjects and response measures that are unrealistic in the context of counselling and clinical research.

Based on the foregoing, it may be useful to state tentatively and in a nuclear fashion a few *principles* (which some may find self-evident and unremarkable):

1. The fit between a problem and the specific research method chosen is crucial.
2. One cannot, in the abstract, designate any single design as "best".
3. Asserting causal relationships in the social sciences is an epistemological snare.
4. Most classical research strategies are unrealistic in the domain of counselling psychology, given its research needs.
5. Research in counselling should reflect the relativistic and pluralistic systems within which the practitioner works (Lecomte & Bernstein, 1979).

Granted the above, the following *suggestions* are proffered for consideration by the counselling researcher.

1. Subjects are difficult to find; they are not always cooperative, and the data tend to be soft (Kraemer, 1981). These facts should stimulate the elaboration of robust, relevant, but rigorous strategies.
2. Exploratory data analysis techniques could be used more systematically to learn directly from the data (Hartwig & Dearing, 1979) instead of prematurely trying to confirm or disconfirm hypotheses.

3. We should continue to explore the utility especially of such strategies as quasi-experimental, intensive, time-serial designs as well as unobtrusive measures, field-based, and evaluative procedures.
4. Programmatic research and replication should be given a new respectability. In the long run, replication studies would save significant amounts of time, money, and energy.
5. Integrative, critical reviews of Canadian literature should be encouraged, for there is a paucity of such scholarly contributions in our field. This kind of integration and synthesis of findings provides insight and direction for future research.
6. Though applied research needs to be promoted, basic research into how counselling process and behavior change happen must not be neglected.
7. Our training programs are unique among practitioners within the mental health field. Particularly characteristic of them is the integration of basic and applied competencies. Moreover, research is an essential responsibility of counselling psychologists and they need to be trained accordingly (Thompson & Super, 1964). Improvements in our training methods should not be least in priority among our research agenda.

Research support in counselling

Research in counselling psychology in Canada takes place in a variety of settings. The pattern of these settings and of the "soft" financial infrastructure that defrays research costs resembles more what occurs in the United States than in Europe or elsewhere. The principal setting is the university where, not coincidentally, graduate training is normally provided in this field.

What is characteristically Canadian, however, is the high level of support for training programs as well as their integrated research components that comes from provincial governments. What is even more unusual and, indeed, laudable is that provincial governments conduct research in counselling, either directly in branches of their own ministries or by contract with private institutes. Included within this research endeavour are the development of psychometric instruments and the promotion

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of library and archival resources for use in such counselling settings as schools, colleges, universities, community mental health centers, employment offices, rehabilitation clinics, and therapeutic communities, among others.

The federal government, needless to say, is deeply engaged in significant research projects (to which we have alluded above), especially those which bear on the enhancement of ambitious employment counselling programs. Allied to this is the development of an extensive network of employment counselling centers using paraprofessional counsellors trained in government programs.

The principal problem we discern relative to this area of the profession, on a provincial and national scale, is that there has been an elaborate development of human services without, in many instances, a proportionate commitment to the evaluation of such services. And we are not aware of a systematic, cumulative effort to organize research on a nationwide basis, providing for sustained contact between the research units of various regions. Among the unfortunate consequences of this reality is that 1) many of our more productive professionals are tied into American publication and research networks, and 2) there is a fragmentation of research efforts and a patchwork approach to meeting those challenges that contemporary society is presenting the counselling psychologist.

Finally, a limited amount of research is conducted by research institutes that are both privately and publicly funded. Normally, this is done on a contract basis. This type of research seldom receives a broad circulation.

Recommendations

A substantive perspective

There is a large and varied array of sectors in which research characterized by inventiveness and imagination as well as methodological rigour needs to be done. Within that array can be found the following, presented without presumption, here, of their relative importance.

1. Development of innovative methodological procedures for the evaluation of the counselling effectiveness of the counselling psychologist.
2. Development of systematic, cumulative approaches to preventing and remedying

conduct disorders that characteristically appear at one or another level of our educational system.

3. Doing critical integrative reviews of Canadian literature as well as of Canadian program development in this field.
4. Development of more adaptive multivariate research projects, particularly of an interdisciplinary character.
5. Continued investigation of clinical counselling modalities for the correction of affective and behavioral dysfunction.
6. Continued investigation of process variables in psychological counselling, particularly those of a nonspecific character that appear prepotent in effecting client change.
7. The development of training programs for paraprofessional and non-professional helpers in the "give-psychology-away" tradition (Miller, 1969).
8. The development of service delivery programs and systems for 1) helping parents to develop skills in "socializing", 2) enhancing mental health factors in public school education, 3) improving the nurturant and educational aspects of day-care centers, 4) identification of inevitable life-crises which frequently precipitate maladaptive responses with long-term consequences (e.g. the death of intimates, precipitous ageing, business failure, serious illness), and the most appropriate supportive therapies in each case, 5) the development of palliative-care programs for the terminally ill.
9. Initiating inquiries into the problems and pathogens of contemporary urban life.

Operational support

The view is widespread that funding in Canada for research efforts in the areas which have been defined above is meagre. In none of those areas has support been considered adequate, a view that has been intimated above as each of the three major sectors was reviewed. Nevertheless it may be useful to express here, in some nuclear statements, the need for operational support that researchers in counselling psychology perceive whether they work in

schools and universities, hospitals, private agencies, or other professional settings.

1. Continued and enlarged support of doctoral and post-doctoral fellowship programs is deemed necessary. The provision of funds to facilitate the exchange of graduate students and professors between the various regions of Canada would be highly useful.
2. Special provision of funds to develop models of training and supervision in the domain of research methodologies that are closely tied to the practice of psychoeducation, for example, and other field operations is needed.
3. Educational research journals such as the *Canadian Counsellor* need to be provided more financial support to allow them to focus more intensively on the interplay of theory, practice, and research.
4. Specific support for a wider range of research projects involving especially the concerns and variables of a preventive nature. These projects should be supported as they bear on populations "at risk", independent of the "age-strata" being examined, especially when they reveal a sophisticated developmental approach to human vulnerabilities.
5. Specific support should be channelled into endeavours to provide integrative reviews of research literature and current projects that are emanating from Canadian sources and are addressing Canadian needs.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Conrad LECOMTE received his Ph. D. from the University of California at Santa Barbara in 1975. Prior to this he worked as an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Moncton for three years and as a counselling psychologist in Rouyn-Noranda for three years. He is currently an associate professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Montreal. His current interests include counsellor training, interpersonal communication and psychotherapeutic change. Research in counsellor education has focused on teaching methodologies for the acquisition of therapeutic skills, and in psychotherapy on examining what patient, therapist, and techniques variables are important as determinants of outcome and process.

Florent DUMONT, Ed. D., is associate professor in the Department of Educational Psychology and Counselling at McGill University. He works in the area of developmental counselling with special interests in child-rearing practices and addiction therapy among adolescents and young adults.

Harvey W. ZINGLE, Ph. D., is the Chairman and a professor at the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Alberta. Previously having been coordinator of the Faculty of Education Clinical Services at that University, he is the senior author of five books in counselling and related topics. He has served as President of the Psychologists Association of Alberta and as Alberta's Representative on the Board of Directors of CGCA. He is the former Editor of the Canadian Counsellor.

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