Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy /
Revue canadienne de counseling et de psychothérapie
ISSN 0826-3893 Vol. 54 No. 2 © 2020 Pages 88–111

Committee Members' Perspectives on Admissions to Canadian Master's-Level Counselling Programs: Personal Qualities and Gatekeeping Considerations
Points de vue de membres de comités sur les admissions aux programmes canadiens de maîtrise en counseling : qualités personnelles et considérations sur le contrôle d'accès

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ABSTRACT
Counsellor personal qualities play a role in admission decisions and counsellor efficacy. However, personal qualities have been sparsely investigated regarding admissions to counselling programs in Canada and internationally. Also, counsellor personal qualities lack clarity for adequate assessment at any regulatory stage. Our preliminary study explored counsellor personal qualities according to Canadian counsellor educators. It explored how these educators represent and reflect upon admissions at their institutions. Six Canadian counsellor educators participated in semi-structured individual interviews. Results demonstrated that personal qualities deemed important by participants for both admissions and practice were largely consistent with the current literature. Most participants preferred that personal qualities be assessed during admissions, typically through interviews. Overall, admissions processes appeared to be inherently subjective regardless of efforts at objectivity. Implications of the study are discussed.

RÉSUMÉ
Les qualités personnelles d'une conseillère ou d'un conseiller interviennent dans les décisions d'admission et dans l'efficacité professionnelle, mais elles n'ont été l'objet que de quelques rares examens en ce qui concerne les admissions aux programmes de maîtrise en counseling au Canada et à l'étranger. Par ailleurs, les qualités personnelles du conseiller ou de la conseillère ne sont pas définies suffisamment clairement pour permettre une évaluation adéquate à quelque niveau réglementaire que ce soit. Notre étude préliminaire a examiné les qualités personnelles du conseiller ou de la conseillère, telles qu'elles sont définies par les formateurs de conseillers et conseillères au Canada. Nous avons également exploré de quelle façon ces formateurs et formatrices

présentent les conditions d'admission dans leurs établissements respectifs et leurs réflexions sur le sujet. Six formateurs de conseillers canadiens ont participé à des entrevues individuelles semi-structurées. Les résultats indiquent que les participants accordent beaucoup d'importance aux qualités personnelles, à la fois pour l'admission et pour la pratique, et que ces qualités sont très compatibles avec la littérature actuelle. La plupart des participants ont dit préférer que les qualités personnelles soient évaluées lors de l'admission, au moyen d'entrevues. Néanmoins, les processus d'admission semblent encore très subjectifs, en dépit des efforts déployés pour plus d'objectivité. Nous discutons des implications de l'étude.

Counsellor personal qualities are commonly seen as central to counsellor efficacy (Jennings & Skovholt, 1999) and thus are important components informing both practice and training (Brear et al., 2008). However, requisite personal qualities suffer from a lack of clarity (Homrich, 2009) and their consideration during admissions is not well understood (Hernández et al., 2010; Sebok & MacMillan, 2014). The current research explores counsellor educators' perspectives on what they believe to be important counsellor personal qualities both for admission into master's programs and in practice.

The Counsellor's "Person"

A counsellor's personal qualities are important to therapeutic effectiveness (Brear et al., 2008; Jennings & Skovholt, 1999), whether as necessary conditions for client change (Rogers, 2007) or as foundational to the therapeutic alliance (Heinonen et al., 2014). Similarly, good therapy cannot be reduced to the mere application of technique since it relies in part upon therapist characteristics (Gallagher & Hargie, 1992; Orlinsky & Rønnestad, 2005). In fact, Wheeler (2000) found that counsellor educators most commonly distinguished between "good" and "bad" counselling trainees using personality descriptors such as friendliness, warmth, openness, psychological stability, and mental health. As a result of their interviews with peer-elected "master therapists," Jennings and Skovholt (1999) concluded that mastery involved being an avid learner, having significant life experience, tolerating ambiguity, and being self-aware, mentally healthy, and interpersonally skilled. The five most-cited traits from Halinski's (2009) extensive literature review were warmth and acceptance, empathy, flexibility, self-awareness, and genuineness.

Relatedly, Brear et al. (2008) found that the first and second most common characteristics of unsuitable counselling trainees were of an intra- and interpersonal nature. Henderson and Dufrene's (2012) content analysis of the remediation literature revealed eight common categories of professional competence: "(1) ethical behaviors, (2) symptoms of a mental health diagnosis, (3) intrinsic

characteristics, (4) counseling skills, (5) feedback, (6) self-reflective abilities, (7) personal life difficulties, and (8) procedural compliance" (p. 51). This consensus-derived list offers much overlap with Halinski's (2009) review.

Canadian Codes of Ethics

Both the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association (CCPA) and the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) codify the importance of counsellor or psychologist personal qualities to good and ethical practice. Both associations' codes of ethics include the ethical imperatives for counsellors and psychologists to embody self-awareness, integrity, honesty, and self-responsibility (CCPA, 2007; CPA, 2017). The CPA (2017) further extends the imperative of ensuring competence to trainers and supervisors. Thus, personal quality considerations become essential to the ethical training of counsellors and psychologists at all levels, requiring teachers, administrators, and clinical supervisors to gatekeep in their regard.

Gatekeeping

Gatekeeping in the field of counselling includes "the evaluation of student suitability for professional practice" (Brear et al., 2008, p. 93). It is designed to protect the profession and society by preventing the entrance of unsuitable candidates (Homrich, 2009). By requiring that prospective counsellors pass through various stages of gatekeeping (e.g., admissions, exams, graduation, supervision, and licensure), educators, supervisors, and licensing bodies endorse individuals as competent or professionally capable (Homrich, 2009). Thus, considering the consensus that personal qualities are elemental to counselling competency, the gatekeeping imperative is consequently activated. However, there is no official method for fulfilling this imperative, meaning that institutions design and implement their own procedures (Henderson & Dufrene, 2012). Relevant counsellor personal qualities may also be of a more inherent or "unteachable" nature, or, if teachable, a certain minimum degree or foundation of these qualities may need to be present early (Orlinsky & Rønnestad, 2005; Pope & Kline, 1999; Wheeler, 2000). If so, the presence of certain qualities before prospective counsellors commence graduate studies will better ensure their embodiment in later practice.

Also relevant is the finding that unsuitable students are permitted entry into programs and that some go on to graduate without intervention (e.g., Brown-Rice & Furr, 2013; Gaubatz & Vera, 2002). To mitigate the problematic rates of unsuitable students and graduates, the gatekeeping literature predominantly focuses on within-program solutions, including curriculum or programming, alternative evaluation methods, or remediation, effectively ignoring gatekeeping

at the admissions stage (e.g., Brown-Rice & Furr, 2013; Schwartz-Mette, 2009; Vacha-Haase et al., 2004). However, being selected for a graduate program in counselling is one of the first stages of gatekeeping (Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010) and one that should not be neglected (McCaughan & Hill, 2015). Since trainee evaluation accounts for the majority of gatekeeping (Homrich, 2009), deferring it until later stages may be especially unwise.

Poor rates of remediation and dismissal are commonly reported, and it is difficult to dismiss unsuitable students once they have been admitted (Helmes & Pachana, 2008). Furthermore, the burden of proof for a rightful dismissal falls on an institution after admission (Sowbel, 2012), further highlighting the importance of the gatekeeping function (Hernández et al., 2010; McCaughan & Hill, 2015; Sowbel, 2012).

Admissions Practices

Admission practices have received some consideration in the literature and have been found to focus on academic criteria over and above non-academic criteria (Homrich, 2009; McCaughan & Hill, 2015). Ziomek-Daigle and Christensen (2010) reported on the assessment of interpersonal criteria specifically, though informally, through interviews and other in-person interactions with applicants as well as in part through personal statements and other predominantly academic screening measures. Though limited, available studies appear to show that personal qualities are considered during admissions in various ways, chiefly informally (Nagpal & Ritchie, 2002; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010).

Unfortunately, screening criteria are poor predictors of counsellor competency (Kendrick, 2012; Piercy et al., 1995). Although studies find common use of typical screening measures such as letters of recommendation, statements of intent, academic and work history, and interviews (Nelson et al., 2003; Swank & Smith-Adcock, 2014), many of these measures are seen as problematic or ineffective for predicting counsellor effectiveness. For instance, both grade-point averages and interviews are poor predictors of later clinical skills (Kendrick, 2012; Piercy et al., 1995). In fact, personality measures have been found to explain more variance in internship evaluation than grade-point average (Bethune & Johnson, 2013), whereas student age and past clinical experience predict clinical ratings better, perhaps showing the value of life experience (Piercy et al., 1995).

The Need for Research and the Current Study

There are multiple compelling reasons to assess personal qualities during admissions. First, professional and ethical guidelines call on counsellor educators to gatekeep the profession regarding competence (CCPA, 2007; CPA, 2017). Second, gatekeeping is especially important at the point of admissions (McCaughan

& Hill, 2015) because of intra- and interpersonally impaired students found in graduate programs as well as the number of students graduating despite these kinds of impairment (Brear & Dorrian, 2010; Gaubatz & Vera, 2006). Other reasons include the purported lack of trainability of some necessary competencies (Pope & Kline, 1999), the weak predictive power of some academic admission measures (Kendrick, 2012), and complications of the professional landscape of counselling in Canada (Sebok & MacMillan, 2014). Regarding this last point, counsellors are certified nationally at the master's level, and most provinces regulate psychologists at the master's level as well (CPA, 2018), meaning that fewer gates are passed through for a vast number of counselling professionals.

Unfortunately, despite compelling reasons for the incorporation of personal qualities during admissions, greater clarity of said qualities is needed to provide more precise guidelines for the management of the profession, especially at the training level (Brown, 2013; Henderson & Dufrene, 2012; Homrich, 2009; Sowbel, 2012). In order to assess reliably and validly for qualities important to counsellor proficiency, such qualities require consensus as well as clearer behavioural and other markers (Homrich, 2009). Furthermore, research on admissions in counselling and counselling psychology programs in Canada is virtually non-existent (Sebok & MacMillan, 2014), and few studies address the specific incorporation of personal qualities into admissions processes outside the Canadian context (Hernández et al., 2010). As such, a large and exceedingly important gap exists in the literature, and this study sought to begin to fill it.

Methodology

Participants

We used purposeful sampling to recruit participants best able to comment, in depth, on our study topic. Participant selection also involved maximal variation sampling (Creswell, 2012) since we reached out to faculty members across Canada. Participants were recruited primarily as a result of our attempts to approach Canadian faculty directly and our calls for participation through professional associations (CCPA, CPA).

Six counsellor educators from across Canada were interviewed and are represented by pseudonyms. All were employed in graduate counselling or counselling psychology programs at the time of the interviews and represented an average service on admissions committees of 12.5 years and an average service time as counsellors or psychologists of 21 years. Participants indicated various theoretical orientations: Rogerian, cognitive-behavioural, humanistic, existential, feminist, multicultural, interpersonal, narrative, experiential, object-relations, relational-cultural, and solution-focused.

The sample included four males and two females from five different master's-level counselling or counselling psychology programs. Three participants were

from counselling psychology programs and three from counselling programs. The decision to include both counselling and counselling psychology programs was informed by the overlap of program content and outcome and by the overlap of professional work and codes of ethics. Although differences between these fields are often claimed, we believed that enough overlap exists to seek participants from both program types. For example, diversely regulated professionals often will have attended the same institution, despite its professional "leaning" (e.g., attending a counselling program and registering as a psychologist or attending a counselling psychology program and registering as a counsellor or a psychotherapist).

Although qualitative researchers often determine sample size by seeking saturation, Morrow (2007) explained that "true redundancy can never be achieved . . . because of the uniqueness of each participant's experience" (p. 217). Because this study was truly preliminary and exploratory, six participants were adequate to find trends, to discover unique contributions, and to begin an exploration of the topic.

Data Collection and Analysis

We used one-on-one semi-structured interviews to collect data to allow for flexibility in direction and response, in line with an interpretivist agenda. Interviews were conducted by the first author over the phone or in person and lasted between 55 and 90 minutes. Participants were asked about how admissions were managed in their programs, both generally and regarding personal quality considerations specifically. They were also asked about the personal qualities they deemed important for counsellors to possess and why.

Data were analyzed first through transcription, journaling, and reflection. We used ongoing analysis to maximize the potential for creating coherent results, as suggested by Merriam (2009). Reflective and reflexive practices, particularly through journaling, were used throughout data collection and analysis. After the interviews were completed, they were reviewed while noting salient contributions, connections between interviews, and detailed answers to research questions. These steps followed Merriam's (2009) "rudimentary analysis" (p. 174).

Afterward, transcripts were coded using codes generated in early interviews as well as new codes developed throughout the analysis. Codes generally consisted of symbols, keywords, and short phrases. We coded the interviews analytically, intending to reflect deeply on what was said and meant and on the abstract interpretations that followed, instead of merely describing the data (Merriam, 2009). After coding, the codes were organized into categories. As Merriam (2009) described, "the construction of categories is highly inductive. You begin with detailed bits or segments of data, cluster data units together that seem to go together, then 'name' the cluster" (p. 182). Many of our categories arose from frequent and common contributions, while others represented abstractions from the data or idiosyncratic participant commentary.

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness in the current study, the researchers' interpretations were "bracketed" to hear and understand participants better (Merriam, 2009; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Although it is impossible to remove the researchers from the data, we engaged in extensive self-reflection at all stages to maintain awareness of our position and its impact on the research. The principal researcher was a master's-level graduate student in a counselling psychology program supervised by the secondary researcher, a faculty member in the same program. This study was the principal researcher's master's thesis.

Results

Results are organized into two broad categories, both containing four themes. The first category relates to personal qualities deemed important for counsellors to possess and includes (a) intrapersonal skills, (b) life experience and human understanding, (c) interpersonal skills, and (d) scholarly abilities. The second category relates to the admissions process. It includes general reflections, reflections on how admissions committees view their role, reflections on the assessment of applicants, and reflections on the assessment of personal qualities (see Table 1).

Important Counsellor Personal Qualities

Intrapersonal Skills

Intrapersonal skills involve various self-management skills or skills that individuals employ internally. This theme was organized into five qualities: (a) self-aware and self-engaged, (b) growth-oriented, (c) flexible/open-minded, (d) professionally dedicated and aware, and (e) conscientious.

Self-Aware and Self-Engaged

Participants described the importance of self-awareness and self-reflection both in the sense of (a) an active, ongoing awareness and reflection and (b) an accurate sense of self, including biases and strengths. Participants also described the importance of self-engagement, including being self-developed, mature, or healthy. All but one participant mentioned the need to be self-aware and self-reflective, and most participants mentioned this need repeatedly.

Growth-Oriented

Being growth-oriented included qualities such as curiosity, commitment to learning, and "teachability." While overlapping with qualities of self-engagement, being growth-oriented was often conceived of as a separate quality, involving a commitment to lifelong learning. John, for example, listed humility and being "teachable" as important counsellor qualities, saying that "the best students are

Table 1
Thematic Organization of Results

Category 1: Important Personal Qualities of Counsellors
Theme 1: Intrapersonal Skills
Theme 2: Life Experience and Human Understanding
Theme 3: Interpersonal Skills
Theme 4: Scholarly Abilities
Category 2: Admissions
Theme 1: Descriptions of and Reflections on the Admissions Process
Theme 2: The Role of the Admissions Committee
Theme 3: Assessing Applicants
Theme 4: Assessment of Personal Qualities During Admissions

the ones who pursue their supervisor wanting to be better." He related this to being open to challenges and taking risks.

Flexible/Open-Minded

Four participants listed flexibility or open-mindedness as important qualities. In describing these traits, participants consistently discussed cognitive flexibility, perspective taking, and open-mindedness, focusing on the self-regulating, cognitive aspects of openness or flexibility, rather than the behavioural, socially enacted aspects of it.

Professionally Dedicated and Aware

Most participants discussed the importance of career-focused qualities such as planning, reflection, and self-management. For example, Mark called for "passion" and a "commitment to the profession." He wanted students to have "a fairly clear understanding of their career trajectory" and to "know what the current issues are, [including] current trends [and] challenges." This connected to other participants' desire for professional awareness, often as a means to ensure goodness of fit for their programs.

Conscientious

Though not mentioned by as many participants, conscientiousness and its correlates were cited as important. Paul explicitly cited conscientiousness as central to competency: "You need somebody who's very disciplined and conscientious [and] who will actually really want to take care of their clients and is genuinely concerned to do a good job."

Life Experience and Human Understanding

Three participants mentioned this personal quality theme and effectively bridged a gap between intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. Participants

described the need for deep reflection and curiosity about human nature and the human condition, in a sense describing the use of socially oriented intrapersonal skills. Because the thoughtfulness or wisdom often described in this cluster was generally tied to personal experience or having "lived in the world," it involved more than just self-reflection.

Interpersonal Skills

These skills were defined as social skills or counsellor behaviour aimed at being socially appropriate and relationally facilitative with clients. This theme was organized into the following qualities: (a) other-aware, (b) personable, (c) empathic/good listener, (d) caring/desire to help, and (e) warm/open.

Other-Aware

All participants referred in some way to the importance of being aware of others. This included being aware of one's impact on others and of social situations in general. Thus, this category encompasses the multiple participant contributions labelled as interpersonal, social, or people skills. For example, Emily suggested the importance of qualities in this cluster, including having "interpersonal competence" and being "other-aware and other-oriented."

Personable

This quality involved the ability to connect with or relate to others. Most participants discussed this, though many in slightly different ways. Emily tied this to genuineness or authenticity and wanted candidates who come across as "someone who's really going to connect well and appropriately with others," especially for the sake of the therapeutic alliance. Both John and Mark mentioned their preference for applicants to show that they can connect with people generally within the admissions interview or, as John added, to be able to "relate to people."

Empathic/Good Listener

This category was one of the more complex categories due to diverse participant definitions and explanations. Three participants said good listening involved appropriate sharing or self-disclosure. For example, Mark valued appropriate and meaningful sharing, such as not being too superficial, tangential, or verbose. Adam explained that dominating conversations is "not conducive to this caring for other people, the empathy for other people, or the need to listen as part of our own self-reflection."

Similarly, empathy was often described as including accurate reflection and active listening. Adam described this as an ability to "listen undistractedly," including important attending skills such as "body posture," "eye contact," and "trying to structure how much input [you're] providing and how much listening [you're] doing." Alternatively, some participants described empathy as dispositional,

including placing oneself in the client's world, listening with compassion, or "resonat[ing] with the client's worldview."

Caring/Desire to Help

Two participants mentioned a quality in this realm as central. For instance, Paul shared that "to be a good counsellor . . . you need to want to help people with their issues," and Adam believed that the important counsellor quality of being caring meant being "drawn to people," liking them, and having unconditional positive regard.

Warm/Open

Qualities in this category not only related to empathy but to the intrapersonal qualities of openness, delineated from this cluster based on their internal rather than social nature. In this case, participants indicated the importance of a counsellor's socially enacted presence as accepting, non-judgmental, warm, and open. John prioritized warmth, including creating a "warm, safe place" for clients to know that the counsellor "is there for them."

Scholarly Abilities

Paul shared that being knowledgeable, smart, or academically strong was important to the practice of counselling, since "it's not like intelligence has nothing to do with counselling." He associated this with the quality of human understanding, adding the need to be "knowledgeable about what's known in the field of psychology" and to have a "solid background in the science of psychology." Others noted the importance of being academically prepared for graduate school, without mentioning the relevance of these qualities afterward.

Admissions

Descriptions of and Reflections on the Current Admissions Process

This theme included seven sub-themes, which considered the methods used for current admissions reviews as well as general reflections on the admission process. These include (a) evolution of process, (b) application criteria and stages, (c) rubrics, ranking, and subjectivity, (d) specific criteria reflections, (e) gatekeeping, (f) gate slipping, and (g) constraints to gatekeeping.

Evolution of process represented the common reflection that admissions procedures had evolved and were still evolving. All participants indicated external and internal forces that led to changes in procedure, with John explaining that "we keep on trying to refine our system to gatekeep." In this spirit, many participants referred to changes that had been discussed by the faculty group (e.g., adding interviews to the admissions process) or to changes that had been made in the past or that they hoped for in the future.

Application criteria and stages explored what criteria were used to assess applicants. All participants declared their approval of the fact that the admissions process at their institution involved reviewing applicants' GPA and/or academic background, work and volunteer experience, statement of intent, and letters of reference. Other admissions criteria were used more variably, such as research experience, specific coursework, or counselling-related work samples. Two participants indicated the use of individual interviews and one the use of group interviews. In processing applications, four participants noted an initial rule in/rule out stage, sometimes performed by non-faculty staff based on specific minimum requirements. All used a process of individual file review by at least two faculty members, followed by a collaborative discussion to rank students and/or to establish who would be admitted. Decisions about who would be admitted were generally made by a core or an entire faculty group and more rarely by one member's urging.

Rubrics, ranking, and subjectivity explored the use of rubrics and candidate rankings during admissions as well as their subjectivity. Four participants indicated having a rubric for ranking applicants, while some ranked students without a rubric. The interpretation and use of these rubrics or ranking systems varied across and within programs. Participants reported using Likert-type scales to rank between 6 and over 20 dimensions, including GPA, work/volunteer experience, reference letters, interpersonal skills, self-awareness, commitment, and overall fit. Most of these rubrics targeted explicit applicant criteria or submissions (e.g., academic background and letter of intent) rather than ranking non-academic or personal qualities.

In exploring how a specific score would be assigned to an applicant submission, most participants indicated that this was subjective and often holistic. Some dimensions were said to have guided scoring (e.g., a certain GPA earns a certain score), but other dimensions did not include any guidance on how to determine scores. Regarding ranking applicants for overall admission, most participants ranked applicants holistically, not merely using a quantitative score. John explained that, before assigning a rating, his committee "spend[s] time discussing a certain applicant and just trying to get everybody's feel for [them]." Most used the quantitative scores or rubrics as guidelines, relying more on impressions and collaborative discussions of applicants.

Specific criteria reflections generated insight regarding complications with specific admissions considerations, such as how programs interpret or use letters of intent, references, or academic background. For example, concerns arose regarding letters of intent, which were reported as being written and interpreted idiosyncratically and as potentially not being written by the actual applicant. Letters of reference were also a topic of concern since participants reported that they typically lacked discriminant validity due to being written so positively.

Gatekeeping referred to participant commentary on gatekeeping at the admissions stage. Four participants invoked this imperative without prompting, mentioning the need to protect the profession, candidates, students, and the public. Two participants indicated that admissions represented the first stage of gatekeeping for the profession. Furthermore, both Lynn and Emily acknowledged the heightened need to gatekeep responsibly due to the nature of the program and of the profession, with Lynn explaining that "more attention [is] given to it" because it is not merely academic.

Gate slipping explored participant views regarding instances where, despite unsuitability, candidates entered or graduated from counselling programs. Most participants expressed confidence in their admissions processes. Although all acknowledged some gate slipping, most estimated that this occurred about once per year. Mark shared that "we really think we do a great job in really selecting strong people" but that this "depends on the year." Adam explained that

> once in awhile, we've missed where people have been likely less forthcoming in the information we get. So, we end up with people who are very good academically but then struggle when it comes to engaging in the interactive aspects of our program.

In *constraints to gatekeeping*, many participants mentioned factors that complicated their screening processes. These were predominantly economic issues (e.g., admissions quotas), legal concerns, and administrative misunderstanding. Three participants mentioned neo-liberal constraints to gatekeeping. Lynn, Mark, and Emily all cited complications due to applicants who were financially motivated. Rather than have the desire to counsel, these applicants sought job security or an upgrade to their teaching licences. Mark shared another neo-liberal concern when a program is "forced to . . . go into the bottom of a wait-list where we should not have had to go or even to people that we would've rejected . . . because they minimally qualified."

The Role of the Admissions Committee

This second theme, containing four sub-themes, addressed aspects of how participants reflected upon and viewed their roles during admissions.

In the first sub-theme, *power and fairness*, participants expressed concerns about the impacts that admissions decisions had on applicants' lives. They acknowledged their inherent power and subjectivity juxtaposed with the need for fairness. Despite knowing that things could never be totally fair, John said that he still worried about it: "I think if we make a mistake, were we too subjective or . . . did we apply rigour? Or did we just . . . not sleep well last night?"

As a common remedy, the next sub-theme, *checks and balances*, represented how participants tried to make the screening process fair, generally through methods

of triangulation or interrater reliability. Regarding triangulation, multiple data sources were used to come to robust conclusions about applicants. Most participants referred to the use of multiple applicant materials to form holistic or "well-rounded" judgments. Concerning interrater reliability, multiple raters were employed in the assessment of applicants to control for subjectivity. Participants also described using collaborative dialogue and other checks and balances to ensure the involvement of multiple committee members in admissions assessments and decisions.

In the next sub-theme, *experience*, participants saw their experience as a tool for making sound judgments and as a check on their power. Mark explained that "when you're teaching and interviewing and practising yourself and you're immersed in the profession of counsellors . . . you have a fair sense of who would [and wouldn't] be successful within the profession."

Finally, *limits of knowledge* represented the prevailing notion that despite checks and balances, participants were ultimately limited in their ability to judge applicants with complete accuracy. Paul shared that "however much you know an applicant . . . all you have is the evidence before you, which is always going to be superficial in relation to who they really are as people."

Assessing Applicants

The third theme included four sub-themes exploring how applicants to counselling psychology and counselling programs were assessed during admissions.

Holism brought together common discussions about the holistic judgment of candidates. In this, participants either explicitly indicated the holistic view taken by their admissions committee or referred in some way to seeing a person "as a whole." Participants consistently used holistic language, referring to how they "experienced" applicants, how applicants were "coming across," impressions of applicants, what they were "radiating when . . . in the room," and "building a picture" or getting a sense of applicants.

Extrapolation included the tendency for participants to draw indirect conclusions and to extrapolate from applicant data to make admissions decisions. Participants discussed information that they gathered about applicants as "markers" for certain qualities, attributes, or future potential. Paul reported this as "always an element . . . unavoidably, of reading between the lines."

Paper versus person concerned how applicants might present in person versus on paper. In these cases, there was a common acknowledgement that applicants might not be fully or truthfully represented in their paper applications and that assessors might get a better sense of applicants and make better admission decisions if they met applicants in person.

Similarly, *academics versus personal qualities* explored participant views regarding the need to assess both non-academic and academic skills. All participants felt that a balance of both would enable selection of the best candidates. Adam

explained that his committee wanted both "some [academic] assurance that you're going to be able to work at a master's level" and "some assurance . . . as to [your] interpersonal skills."

Assessment of Personal Qualities During Admissions

This fourth theme included data about how personal qualities were assessed during admissions, preferences and issues regarding the assessment of these qualities, and the use of interviews.

The first sub-theme, *current practices,* explored how participants currently assessed for personal qualities during screening at their institutions. While no one indicated measuring personal qualities with standardized assessments, three participants indicated explicit measures or steps during admissions to consider such qualities. These participants reported assessing personal qualities during interviews or using rubrics that ranked for specific personal qualities after observing or interacting with applicants. Otherwise, most participants agreed that their programs assessed for personal qualities informally. Paul explained that non-academic qualities and character "come into play in our judgment about people" but not "in a really explicit, formal way."

Besides interviews, which were conducted by three participants, personal qualities were assessed through letters of intent, letters of reference, and past work or volunteer experience. Adam explained that the "letter of intent gives [applicants] an opportunity to share some of themselves and their willingness to self-reflect," while the "letters of reference, when they're well done . . . , tell us something about that individual and their ability to work with other people."

The second sub-theme, *preferences about personal quality assessments*, gathered participant preferences regarding how personal qualities might best be considered during admissions, if at all. The three participants who indicated explicitly that they assessed applicants' personal qualities during admissions strongly supported the practice.

Concerning how such assessments might be done if they were not already, most participants preferred interviews, with two preferring group interviews specifically. More generally, John conceptualized personal quality assessments as best when done qualitatively since "there are some things that you cannot get quantitatively." He stipulated that this process "has to be informed qualitative. . . . You don't do a qualitative study without doing a lit[erature] review."

The third sub-theme, *issues in assessing personal qualities*, included common concerns that arose about the assessment of personal qualities in admissions, mostly to do with validity, objectivity, and fairness. For example, John expressed the desire for "more formal guidelines," explaining that his "feeling is that we don't have a solid enough structure" to assess applicants. Paul, representing the common fear of litigation and unfairness, insisted on "a really objective way of trying to measure [personal qualities] in a fair, balanced way."

The topic of admissions interviews arose consistently, thus comprising the next sub-theme, *reflections on interviews*. The three participants already using interviews were resoundingly attached to them as a crucial component of admissions. Emily indicated that the interview "yields too much additional valuable information to rely on the paper files alone."

The three participants who did not indicate the use of interviews nevertheless saw value in them, at least to some extent. Adam thought interviews would make personal quality considerations more explicit and thus more successful. Paul explained that while he "actually would prefer if we had interviews," he was skeptical of their value in part because of "the cognitive literature [indicating] that our judgments about these things are not that accurate." Other participants noted issues with interviews, such as their subjectivity, limited nature, and labour intensiveness.

Discussion

Important Counsellor Personal Qualities

In general, participants reported important counsellor qualities that were well aligned with the research (Halinski, 2009; Henderson & Dufrene, 2012), indicating that the Canadian counselling context may be similar to other contexts. Overall, it seems that the kinds of qualities that come up do so again and again but can be variably labelled, defined, and categorized. As they explored important counsellor personal qualities, witnessing participants provided insight into the complexity of this topic and the need for greater consensus. In particular, this study provided insight into how personal qualities might factor into gatekeeping. Participants often struggled to define some labels or their descriptions overlapped with other, arguably non-synonymous qualities, providing a salient example of the complications that admissions committees and other gatekeepers face when incorporating personal quality considerations into their reviews or assessments. This also offered a tentative explanation for why there is such variability in these assessments. Although an extensive comparison of the literature and our study results is not possible here due to space limitations, salient points are highlighted.

Intrapersonal Skills

Overlap exists with the literature regarding intrapersonal skills described in our study (Brear & Dorrian, 2010; Halinski, 2009; Henderson & Dufrene, 2012) and with skills listed by the National Research Council (2011) (e.g., conscientiousness, stress tolerance [or self-care], self-development [self-engagement in this study], and flexibility). Canadian professional codes of ethics also correspond well to the first two intrapersonal clusters. Specifically, the CCPA (2007) invokes the need for self-awareness and self-development, whereas the CPA (2017) includes standards relating to self-knowledge, self-understanding, and self-care.

Overlap was sparser regarding the importance of professional dedication and awareness. It seems unlikely that counsellors and counsellor educators would explicitly disagree with the importance of professional dedication and understanding, considering that they seem implicit to good practice. It may be more a case of what comes to the forefront when asked about important qualities. Thus, several people may rank the most important qualities differently while still endorsing a wide variety of other important qualities. Furthermore, with a nuanced and subjective exploration such as this, many qualities may not be mentioned explicitly but could be accepted as implicit within other clusters or even secondary to them. For example, being growth-oriented and self-aware may lead naturally to professional dedication and being professionally dedicated might include self-awareness and a growth-orientation already.

The intrapersonal cluster of conscientiousness was not mentioned directly by many participants in this study despite being well supported by professional documents and by research. For example, Williams (1998) found that scales on the MMPI-2 corresponding to conscientiousness were significantly predictive of counselling effectiveness. Conscientiousness was also found to predict later medical school success, likely due to its relevance during internships (Lievens et al., 2009). The CPA (2017) itself references many aspects of conscientiousness in its code of ethics (e.g., being fair, responsible, honest, and respectful).

Interpersonal Skills

The National Research Council's (NRC) conception of necessary 21st-century skills drew from Klein et al.'s (2006) taxonomy, which focused on both communication/listening skills and relationship-building skills (e.g., cooperation, trust, service orientation, self-presentation, and social influence). Overlap with the NRC is further mirrored by the literature that corresponds largely to our results (Halinski, 2009; Henderson & Dufrene, 2012).

Of note is the complication of self-awareness and other-awareness being confounded in various places in the literature and by participants. Since participants described these often as distinct skills, we presented them separately. Presenting them separately is also supported by their directional focus (inward or outward) and arguably creates better clarity in their assessment and development. Similarly, complications are present in the quality of being personable since it is often delineated under various labels (e.g., relating well to others, building rapport, being authentic or genuine). For an unknown reason, the quality of genuineness was rarely mentioned by participants in our study, though other qualities fitting under the label of "personable" were common.

The quality of empathy or being a good listener also brings interesting complexity. While empathy is very common in the literature (Halinski, 2009), some scholars delineate the skill-based quality of empathy *expression* (Henderson & Dufrene, 2012), while others acknowledge that empathy may be related to but

is not synonymous with active listening skills (Klein et al., 2006). In reviewing participants' descriptions of empathy in our study, it became clear that empathy was construed in two semi-distinct ways. First, empathy was conceived of by some as listening and reflection skills and was decidedly more skills-based and teachable. Second, empathy was posed as a cognitive or affective practice that was dispositional. This second conceptualization of empathy was associated with compassion and affective resonance and saw empathy as more diffuse and irreducible to a skill set, suggesting it as more inherent and less teachable. While these qualities may be linked or one may be secondary to the other, there was a distinct difference regarding how participants in this study represented empathy and its correlates. This kind of complexity presents a good example of why clarity about these qualities is important. Clearly, we may use the same word (empathy) to mean different things, and if so, assessment and training may become increasingly complicated.

Scholarly Abilities

Considering that this study included the exploration of admissions, participants commonly referenced the need for academically strong students despite it not being the focus of the study. However, only one participant endorsed explicitly the importance of a counsellor being scholarly or having a specific academic background. This divide, whether or not the true explanation, seemed to correspond to program type (i.e., counselling psychology).

The literature reviewed here did not explore scholarly abilities as an important counsellor quality, which seems chiefly due to academic abilities being conceived of as separate from personal qualities. However, just as interpersonal and intrapersonal skills are confounded, so are academic abilities and personal qualities. For example, the common endorsement for counsellors to be growth-oriented and curious could correspond to or even subsume the category of scholarly abilities, just as conscientiousness seems fundamental to academic success. Thus, the divide between academic and non-academic qualities appears to be unclear or artificial.

Admissions in Counselling

Evolving Process

Considering that admissions processes appeared to be evolving and largely self-guided in our research, consensus is not apparent and more research is suggested. Further research on the predictive validity of various admissions measures is needed, especially regarding non-academic qualities. The effectiveness of admissions to counselling programs in Canada needs further investigation to work toward a robust evidence base for this important counsellor training stage. Even before more research is conducted, considering the questionable usefulness of some screening measures, counselling programs could alter their admissions to reflect the already existing research better. For example, research has demonstrated

that GPA and academic background are better at predicting academic versus clinical success (Bethune & Johnson, 2013; Kendrick, 2012). While scholarly abilities are unequivocally important to graduate school success, programs focusing primarily or solely on such abilities may be prioritizing immediate or short-term academic success over long-term clinical or professional success. Thus, programs could seek to balance academics and non-academics in a well-supported way. For instance, letters of intent or of recommendation are not well supported, while life and past client experience appears to be a more robust predictor of clinical success (Piercy et al., 1995).

Constraints to Gatekeeping

Of course, there appear to be various barriers to shifting toward increasingly robust admissions. Current screening measures appeared potentially compromised by a lack of resources, by administrative misunderstanding, and by neo-liberal trends. For example, financial pressure to admit full cohorts may put pressure on committees and impact gate slipping, producing longer-term negative impacts on the profession and on society. It seems incredibly important that program groups advocate for robust admissions, particularly to educate administrations about the non-academic qualities in need of assessment, as an imperative to protect the program and its integrity and to protect the profession and society. Furthermore, more research should be done regarding the causes of and solutions to gate slipping.

Assessment of Personal Qualities During Admissions

Possible means of assessing personal qualities include standardized tests or faculty-administered assessments, portfolio submissions (including videos or projects), and experiential exercises such as role-playing, responding to case studies, or giving presentations (Swank & Smith-Adcock, 2014). A wider variety of admissions tools were present in the research than in our study, and it is possible that admissions in Canada could incorporate more diverse measures or even replace some less robust measures with more targeted ones (e.g., a reflection on counsellor identity in the place of one letter of reference). Overall, despite the consensus that personal qualities are important to counselling and that some of these qualities are best assessed during admissions, participants in this study indicated varying levels of engagement with these assessments.

Interviews

Interviews represent a particularly interesting part of the admissions process for counselling programs, with three participants (i.e., half) indicating their use despite reportedly higher use in the United States (McCaughan, 2010; Swank & Smith-Adcock, 2014). Despite much corroboration about interviews as the favoured means of assessing personal qualities (McCaughan, 2010), Nelson et al.

(2003) have noted concerns about the lack of formal and structured processes to ensure sound interview protocols. Furthermore, despite the perceived usefulness or credibility of interviews both on behalf of most of our participants and in the literature (Leverett-Main, 2004), interviews were not predictive of academic and/or clinical performance in several studies (Bethune & Johnson, 2013; Piercy et al., 1995). Similarly, medical school literature represents traditional interviews predominantly as neither reliable nor valid, alternatively presenting structured formalized interviews as effective screening measures (Patterson et al., 2016). Exploring structured interviews for counselling admissions seems advised, especially considering the apparent preference to screen through interviews.

It is possible, of course, that interviews have failed to predict future success partly because they occur so late in the selection process, thus providing little discrimination between already strong (and already largely screened) applicants (Piercy et al., 1995). Likewise, such studies would not track applicants screened *out* of the process by the interview. Hence, no control group effectively exists with which to compare accepted applicants after they are trained. This means that while the interview may not discriminate well between accepted applicants, it may enable programs to screen out inappropriate candidates. This topic needs more exploration.

Subjectivity

Despite the very present concerns about power, fairness, and objectivity in the screening process, the reality of subjectivity was apparent. Whether through holistic language, qualitative judgment, idiosyncratic approaches to assessing applicant materials, or extrapolation from "markers" found during screening, represented admissions processes seemed naturally to involve subjective assumptions and interpretation. While the use of interpretation is neither escapable nor necessarily problematic, it renders the admissions process inherently derivative or subjective. Like the counselling process itself, ever-present subjectivity requires responsible use. While we await more research, we can do our best to use the checks and balances mentioned by participants in addition to using subjectivity for what benefits it brings.

Limitations

This study is preliminary, exploratory, and nongeneralizable. It was not intended to be generalizable, nor can it be because of the sample size and sampling method. The perspectives of the participants in this study are valuable because of their uniqueness from and overlap with extant research, not because they represent fully the Canadian context or all programs in Canada. Still, more research is needed to identify more perspectives and to establish consensus better.

This study was limited by sampling bias in that most people who volunteered were independently interested or invested in the topic and thus were likely to

provide commentary different to those without the drive to participate. Also, participants were not given interview questions beforehand and thus gave answers that may have been different had they had more time to prepare.

Another inherent limitation is the embedded view of the researchers. While we worked reflexively and attempted to be transparent and fair in our interpretation of the research findings, we still filtered the discussions and analysis through our worldviews. We created an organizational system that seemed logical and true to the data, but this system is our own. Thus, other researchers may well have organized the results entirely differently, to a dissimilar end.

Similarly, the language used in interview questions propelled the discussions in certain directions. For example, using the terms *formal* and *informal* regarding admissions practices often directed conversations toward standardized assessments, though this direction was not necessarily intended. As in all studies, the language chosen impacted the responses and the results.

Furthermore, while this study generated a great deal of insight into the topic at hand, it still left many areas unexplored. With such a complex topic, there were many directions that discussions could have gone and nuances that could be further explored.

Implications for Counselling and Education

It is at least preliminarily clear that personal qualities are important to the effective practice of counselling and, as such, that they deserve a place in the screening, training, and assessment of counsellors and psychologists. Likely due to the subjective and complex nature of personal quality constructs, their incorporation into admissions and into other assessment stages can be informal, problematic, or inadequate. Considering their importance, it seems advisable to develop a plan for incorporating personal quality considerations into counsellor education and regulation, despite the difficulty in doing so. While this is done in some programs and in general (such as in our codes of ethics), it is best advised to be done intentionally and soundly to advance the profession and to protect the public. It may not be enough merely to suggest the ethical imperative of various qualities—we may need to ensure their embodiment or at least to advance the call for them more deeply, in all arenas of our profession.

Concluding Thoughts

This research provides further consensus, although preliminary, on the consideration of important counsellor personal qualities. Moreover, it is a catalyst for an important area of formal exploration in the counselling profession. While this research offers a system for categorizing various important personal qualities that could help in their future conceptualization, the next necessary steps seem particularly to involve working toward robust assessments of personal qualities during admissions, training, registration, and beyond. While establishing greater

consensus in the Canadian context seems to be a worthy step, this consensus may do more if complemented with clear methods for incorporating it into the management and regulation of our profession. For instance, further evidence-based rationales could be used to operationalize these constructs and to inform adequate assessment at multiple levels. In the end, we may know enough to say that personal quality considerations are an element of best practices in our field. Still, more may need to be done about incorporating them in intentional and sound ways.

Participants in this study indicated admissions processes similar to those found elsewhere, with some focusing more on academic criteria and others maintaining at least equal focus on academic and non-academic criteria. This preliminary exploration of admissions demonstrates them as a work-in-progress in which consensus is not firmly established and methods are not consistently evidence-based. Perhaps most notable was the inescapable subjectivity in the admissions process and the fact that committee members are ultimately responsible for the gatekeeping imperative at this stage of the profession, despite the unavoidable and sometimes problematic limits present.

Participants in this study represented multiple views on the screening of personal qualities at admissions, though most were generally in favour of the practice. Divergence arose most regarding how personal qualities might best be assessed, although most participants preferred interviews. More investigation into these topics is necessary to generate further clarity.

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