

## THE COEXISTENCE OF COUNSELLOR ROLE VARIABILITY AND COUNSELLING COMPETENCY CONSENSUS: A RESEARCH CHALLENGE

LEROY D. KLAS

*Department of Educational Psychology, Memorial University of Newfoundland*

### *Abstract*

The Jevne (1981) study described the role discrepancies that still exist in counselling in Canada and outlined the competencies deemed most crucial for the counselling practitioner. This article points out that there appears to be more confusion over counsellor roles than over the competencies counsellors need to carry out those roles. The writer then poses five research questions whose further exploration may shed some light on how roles and competencies evolve and how they may be better integrated.

### *Résumé*

L'étude Jevne (1981) décrit l'écart des rôles qui existent présentement dans le counselling au Canada et expose les grandes lignes des compétences dites les plus importantes pour le conseiller praticien. Cet article souligne qu'il semble y avoir plus de confusion par rapport au rôle des conseillers qu'il y en a par rapport aux compétences que les conseillers ont besoin pour faire leur travail. Ensuite, l'auteur pose cinq questions de recherche dont l'étude illuminera peut-être comment les rôles et les compétences évoluent et comment ils pourraient être mieux intégrés.

Most studies into counsellor role have reported variability and even confusion as to exactly what roles counsellors perform (Brown & Strebals, 1973; Dietz, 1972; Hart & Prince, 1970; Shaw, 1973; Shertzer & Stone, 1976). Such ambiguity has led some counsellors to become frustrated with and apathetic about the question of role. The continued inconclusiveness has also led some professionals to narrow their interests in counselling to more highly specific, and possibly more tangible, areas within the counselling field (e.g., biofeedback, values clarification).

However, in spite of such confusion over general counsellor role, many studies show reasonable agreement as to which counsellor competencies are most crucial (Brown & Brown, 1977; Eisenberg & Delaney, 1977; Evans, Hearn, Uhlemann, & Ivey, 1979). Thus, those involved in counselling agree more on needed skills than on the context in which they carry out those skills. The Jevne study highlights the ongoing confusion over counsellor role coupled with an intriguing consensus over necessary counsellor competencies (Jevne, 1981). In the process of developing a scale to evaluate counselling interview competencies, the writer found similar trends (Klas, 1973, 1978).

Below are posed five questions which, if further researched, may shed some light on the differing certainties between role and competency.

### *Research Question #1*

*Are counselling roles more susceptible to change by new "trends" in counselling than are counselling competencies?*

The history of counselling abounds with examples of how the field responded to various zeitgeists. Emphasis on career counselling dominated the field for many years, then testing and measurement, then client-centered counselling, then group counselling; as of late there is a real emergence of the counsellor as consultant, along with a swing back to a career emphasis. Is it possible that such trends in the field have direct effects on perceived role but little effect on the primary counsellor competencies? Are there basic core competencies that exist no matter which role is emphasized?

### *Research Question #2*

*Are counselling roles more defined by those outside the field of counselling, while competencies are more defined by one's training?*

Counsellors function in many different settings, and to a large degree they have adapted their role to the needs of the setting. However, are counselling competencies as adaptable as role appears to be? It can be argued that as employers continue to ask counsellors to be credible, to be accountable, and to have specific skills, there may well be a

concomitant evolution in the counsellor competencies which receive emphasis in counsellor education and which then begin emerging in the field. The Jevne study outlines how those in the field of counselling rank several competencies; of real interest is the fact that those competencies ranked the lowest are in many cases the very skills which those employing counselling personnel are increasingly demanding, namely, career and information skills, testing and measurement skills, skills in consulting with teachers and parents, and coordination and programming skills. If new competencies are demanded from the field, can counsellors adapt, as they have in the area of counsellor role? Can we then anticipate needing new types of training, new types of applicants, and massive re-training and in-service training for those already in the field? What effects, if any, would such an adaptive response have on the profession as such?

#### Research Question #3

*Does a counsellor's philosophy of man and theory of counselling affect the roles he performs to the same degree that they affect the competencies he develops?*

A good clinician or technician is quite aware of the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings to his counselling; he is quite able to describe both the developmental and the counselling rationale for his work. If practitioners are required to develop and carry out new competencies they must either assimilate those new competencies into their existing role theory or rethink their role theory; another alternative, of course, is to change to a setting where they will have no role or theory inconsistency. Is role less affected by differing philosophies, and thus easier to adapt to differing demands in the field?

#### Research Question #4

*Do training programs expose trainees to a variety of roles and theories only to provide a more limited or narrower exposure to specific competencies?*

If we are exposed to fewer competencies, if we have fewer competencies, we may not be as confused as to which competencies we feel are crucial to our functioning. Our practice will reflect the limits of our skills. For example, the *role* and *theory* of measurement is almost a universal in counsellor training programs; however, if specific *skills* are not developed as well, the counsellor is not as likely to see measurement as a high priority. We tend, often, to do more of what we do best and of what we know best. (This applies both to those doing the training and to those being trained.)

#### Research Question #5

*Some of the role confusion in counselling has centered around areas that are now being called "consultation." Will recognizing active consultation with colleagues and parents as a legitimate role in itself help better delineate the other roles?*

Consultation appears to be gaining acceptance as a separate counsellor role, integrated with the other roles, but demanding unique types of competencies. More research into the nature of consultation may provide a better understanding of how the established functions of individual counselling and testing are related to curriculum development, career planning and family adjustment.<sup>1</sup>

#### Summary

Five research questions on counsellor roles and competencies have been posed. It is hoped that these questions will stimulate personal exploration on the part of counsellors and counsellor educators and useful, rigorous research into the areas of counsellor roles and competencies.

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1. We are currently experimenting, in our counsellor education program, with a case study-consultative approach to integrate the practicum and the individual assessment courses. Students are presenting actual cases, complete with diagnostic battery, case history, and reports from the setting, to the entire class, instructors, and even referral sources, if called for. The information is integrated with the results of the class consultation and then fed back directly to the persons involved in the referral in the form of recommendations for action. Several counsellor roles and several specific competencies are called upon; as well, experience in consultation on an actual case study is gained by each person each time a case is reviewed.

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