
Toward a More Unified Understanding of Personal Development in Counsellor Training Programs Vers une compréhension plus unifiée des programmes de formation en développement personnel des conseiller·ère·s

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ABSTRACT

Current conceptualizations of the key personal characteristics associated with effective counsellors vary, which highlights the lack of consensus on what these characteristics constitute and how they are developed. While some characteristics are consistent, other characteristics identified in these studies as important for counsellors in training are not consistent with the research into the personal characteristics associated with therapeutic effectiveness. There is a clear disjunction between the personal characteristics associated with therapeutic effectiveness and the characteristics deemed necessary in counsellor training, and this makes the task of developing an appropriate curriculum and learning environment a challenging one for counsellor educators. Despite stipulations in various training standards that personal development work be incorporated into counselling programs, there is limited research on the experiences, processes, and strategies that effectively promote personal development in trainee counsellors. Implications and recommendations for future research in counsellor training are included.

RÉSUMÉ

Les conceptualisations actuelles des caractéristiques personnelles clés associées aux conseiller·ère·s efficaces varient, ce qui met en lumière le manque de consensus sur ce que sont ces caractéristiques et de quelle manière elles sont développées. Alors que certaines caractéristiques sont cohérentes, d'autres, identifiées dans les recherches comme étant importantes pour les conseiller·ère·s en formation, ne sont pas cohérentes avec les recherches en caractéristiques personnelles associées à l'efficacité thérapeutique. Il y a une disjonction claire entre les caractéristiques personnelles associées à l'efficacité thérapeutique et les caractéristiques qui sont réputées être nécessaires à la formation des conseiller·ère·s. Cela rend la tâche de développer un curriculum et un environnement

d'apprentissage appropriés beaucoup plus exigeante pour les formateurs et formatrices de conseiller-ère-s. Malgré des énoncés dans de nombreux standards de formation qui mentionnent que le travail de développement personnel est incorporé aux programmes de counseling, les recherches sont limitées sur les expériences, les processus, et les stratégies qui promeuvent efficacement le développement personnel chez les conseiller-ère-s en formation. Des implications et des recommandations pour de futures recherches sur la formation des conseiller-ère-s sont incluses.

The contribution of counsellors' personal characteristics to therapeutic effectiveness has long been discussed in the literature (Rogers, 1957; Satir, 1987). Counselling research has demonstrated that a significant degree of client change (30%) in therapy is attributable to relationship factors (Hubble et al., 2010; Norcross & Lambert, 2018). In the last 2 decades, focus has been given to specific therapist factors, including how therapists' personal characteristics impact the counselling relationship and therapeutic outcomes (Heinonen & Nissen-Lie, 2020; Norcross & Lambert, 2018; Wampold et al., 2017). However, despite the ongoing interest in the personal characteristics of counsellors, there is little consensus on what these key characteristics constitute and how they are developed (Christensen et al., 2018). This lack of consensus provides a challenge for those tasked with the preparation of counsellors regarding how to address this important aspect of training, which is sometimes referred to as personal development work (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy [BACP], 2020; Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association [CCPA], 2015; Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia [PACFA], 2022). This concept of personal development is also poorly defined (Johns, 2012; McLeod & McLeod, 2014). In light of an absence of knowledge concerning the personal characteristics that are most important for counselling students to develop and the purpose of personal development work, approaches to personal development in counsellor training will potentially be haphazard, ineffective, and/or tokenistic.

Current conceptualizations of key personal characteristics associated with effective counsellors will be outlined in this article and compared with the characteristics considered important for counsellors in training. The implications of the lack of consensus regarding key personal characteristics for the personal development curriculum within counsellor training programs, including content and strategies, will also be discussed. Finally, recommendations for future research in counsellor training will be provided.

The Personal Characteristics of Effective Counsellors

Norcross and Lambert (2018) synthesized 4 decades of empirical research on effective psychotherapy relationships and concluded that, as part of the impact of broader therapist factors on therapeutic outcome, the personal characteristics of counsellors significantly impact the therapeutic relationship and subsequent

counselling outcomes. Norcross and Lambert's meta-analysis revealed that the personal characteristics of counsellors that demonstrate the strongest evidence for enhancing the therapeutic alliance included non-defensiveness, empathy, positive regard, genuineness, and warmth. Characteristics such as congruence, emotional expression, cultivating positive expectations, and the ability to manage counter-transference were associated with *probable* therapeutic effectiveness.

Focusing more specifically on therapist characteristics and psychotherapy outcomes, Heinonen and Nissen-Lie (2020) conducted a systematic review of research published between 2000 and 2018. They divided therapist characteristics into personal and professional, with personal characteristics subdivided into intrapersonal and interpersonal. Characteristics categorized as professional demonstrated the strongest relationship to therapeutic outcomes, including counter-transference management and coping strategies for difficult situations. Therapists' professional relational qualities, including empathy, warmth and positive regard, clear and positive communication, and the capacity to manage criticism were also demonstrated to predict better therapeutic outcomes (p. 427). Some support was also demonstrated for therapists' emotional intelligence, well-being, and reflective functioning.

Comparing the results of Heinonen and Nissen-Lie's (2020) systematic review and those of Norcross and Lambert's (2018) meta-analysis revealed some similarities and some significant differences. Empathy, warmth, positive regard, and the ability to manage counter-transference were the only characteristics that predicted better therapeutic outcomes in both reviews. The capacity to manage criticism, identified by Heinonen and Nissen-Lie as a predictor of outcome, relies on non-defensiveness, a characteristic highly predictive of outcome according to Norcross and Lambert's research. The ability to manage counter-transference and emotional expression (Norcross & Lambert, 2018) relies to some extent on the intrapersonal characteristics identified by Heinonen and Nissen-Lie: emotional intelligence, well-being, and reflective functioning. However, these intrapersonal characteristics are much broader concepts. Clear and positive communication cannot really be compared with any characteristics identified in Norcross and Lambert's meta-analysis. These differences in language and categorization make identifying the key characteristics of effective counsellors a challenging task.

Wampold and colleagues (2017) recognized the challenge in separating the therapist's personal characteristics and their actions in determining what contributes to positive outcomes. These authors analyzed studies designed to disentangle characteristics and actions either by measuring therapist responses to the same therapeutic situation, measuring therapists' non-therapy characteristics by self-report or the report of others, or by statistically disaggregating client and therapist contributions to the alliance in the data analysis. Characteristics of effective therapists identified using these methods included the ability to form alliances with a range of clients, facilitative interpersonal skills (FIS), professional self-doubt,

and deliberate practice (Wampold et al., 2017). FIS include the ability to be “verbally fluent, express emotion appropriately, [be] persuasive, communicate hopefulness, [be] warm and empathic, create a bond with [clients], and focus on [clients’] problems” (Wampold et al., 2017, p. 45). Wampold and colleagues noted that deliberate practice involves a commitment to ongoing learning and a probable connection with professional self-doubt. A question remains whether some of these characteristics are inherent in the therapist or if they are developed (or enhanced) through training.

Some of the results of Wampold and colleagues’ (2017) research are consistent with previously cited research, with some notable differences (see Table 1). The ability to form alliances with a range of clients to enhance therapeutic change is consistent with the findings of Norcross and Lambert (2018) and those of Heinonen and Nissen-Lie (2020), as is empathy and warmth. Verbal fluency could be considered an aspect of the clear and positive communication identified in Heinonen and Nissen-Lie’s research, and communicating hopefulness is similar to the quality of cultivating positive expectations identified as probably effective in research conducted by Norcross and Lambert. The inclusion of the ability to express emotion appropriately provides more support for the effectiveness of this characteristic identified in Norcross and Lambert’s findings. Characteristics included by Wampold and colleagues (2017) but not identified elsewhere are persuasiveness, a commitment to deliberate practice, and professional self-doubt. Described by some as “humility” (Nissen-Lie et al., 2017), the concept of professional self-doubt derives from the Development of Psychotherapists Common Core Questionnaire (DPCCQ; Orlinsky et al., 1999). Wampold and colleagues reported that better therapeutic outcomes were associated with more frequent expressions of professional self-doubt, with reflectivity being the suggested link. It is also assumed that a commitment to deliberate practice would rely on the counsellor’s reflective functioning, identified as important by Heinonen and Nissen-Lie, but this is a broader construct. Once again, different conceptualizations of counsellor characteristics complicate attempts to achieve consistency.

Research using the DPCCQ, which was developed by the Society for Psychotherapy Research to study the development of therapists over the span of their careers (Orlinsky et al., 1999), also provides insight into the key characteristics of effective therapists. Around 12,000 therapists from different professions worldwide have now participated in research using the DPCCQ (Orlinsky et al., 2015), which focuses on therapeutic process and which provides a summation of therapists’ experiences of their engagement in therapeutic work (Rønnestad & Orlinsky, 2005; Rønnestad et al., 2025). In contrast to the studies previously cited, this research analyses the therapist’s experience of their work. Analysis of six dimensions of work experience revealed three second-level factors: healing involvement, stressful involvement, and controlling involvement. Orlinsky & Rønnestad (2005) note that healing involvement is

Table 1
Comparison of Key Counsellor Characteristics Identified in Major Reviews of the Counselling Research

Level of support for association with counselling effectiveness	Norcross & Lambert (2018)	Heinonen & Nissen-Lie (2020)	Wampold et al. (2017)
Strong demonstrated support	Capacity to build a therapeutic alliance	Capacity to manage criticism	Ability to form alliances with a range of clients
	Non-defensiveness	Empathy	Empathy
	Empathy	Positive regard	Warmth
	Positive regard	Warmth	Verbally fluent
	Genuineness	Clear and positive communication	Persuasiveness
	Warmth	Management of CT	Hopefulness
		Positive coping strategies	Appropriate expression of emotion
			Professional self-doubt
			Commitment to ongoing learning
	Some demonstrated support	Congruence	Reflective functioning
Emotional expression		Emotional intelligence	
Cultivating positive experiences		Well-being	
Ability to manage CT			

defined by scales representing the therapist as personally Invested (involved, committed) and Efficacious (effective, organized) in relational agency, as Affirming (accepting, friendly, warm) and Accommodating (permissive, receptive, nurturant) in relational manner, as currently Highly Skillful, as experiencing Flow states (stimulated, inspired) during therapy sessions, and as using Constructive Coping strategies when dealing with difficulties. (p. 63)

The use of constructive coping strategies to manage difficulties—along with acceptance, friendliness, warmth, permissiveness, receptiveness, and nurture—is consistent with the findings of previously cited research regarding therapeutic effectiveness. Personal characteristics highlighted here that have not been identified previously include the personal investment of therapists in their work, being effective and organized, and feeling stimulated and inspired during therapy sessions. We suggest that these characteristics may speak more to counsellor longevity in the profession than to therapeutic outcomes.

What is evident from an analysis of the empirical research outlined above is that while there is some agreement on a few personal characteristics of effective counsellors, there is still significant divergence in terms of conceptualizing key characteristics considered effective in fostering therapeutic change. There is strong consensus in the recognition of characteristics such as empathy, warmth, positive regard, genuineness, non-defensiveness, hopefulness, the ability to form an alliance with a range of clients, and emotional expression. Other characteristics considered to be associated with effective counsellors include clear communication/verbal fluency, congruence, a commitment to ongoing learning, professional self-doubt, an ability to manage counter-transference, the use of constructive coping strategies to manage difficulties, emotional intelligence, well-being, and reflective functioning, although there appears to be less mutual agreement in the identification of these characteristics. Other research has also identified a myriad of other characteristics as important for counselling effectiveness, including openness (Glenn et al., 2015; Hill et al., 2017; Richardson et al., 2009), emotional stability (Beutler et al., 2003; Jennings & Skovholt, 1999; Richardson et al., 2009), a sense of humour (Glenn et al., 2015), critical thinking (Glenn et al., 2015; Jennings & Skovholt, 1999; Richardson et al., 2009), maturity (Jennings & Skovholt, 1999), integrity (Jennings & Skovholt, 1999; Richardson et al., 2009), and flexibility (Ackerman & Hilsenroth, 2003; Glenn et al., 2015; Richardson et al., 2009).

Key Characteristics for Counsellors in Training

Separate to the research into the counsellor's personal characteristics associated with therapeutic effectiveness have been discussions about the key characteristics required of counsellors in training. Two previous and frequently cited studies were conducted by Pope and Kline (1999) and by Nagpal and Ritchie (2002).

Pope and Kline investigated the most critical characteristics for counsellors in training by asking educators to rank characteristics according to importance and then according to responsiveness to training. These two rankings were combined to produce a list of the most critical characteristics for entry to training. The 10 most critical characteristics identified were acceptance, emotional stability, open-mindedness, empathy, genuineness, flexibility, interest in people, confidence, sensitivity, and fairness. Nagpal and Ritchie's thematic analysis of data collected from interviewing counselling faculty to ascertain the characteristics they were seeking in prospective applicants revealed a combination of professional attributes, personal attributes, and interpersonal skills. The three personal attributes were personal maturity, flexibility, and emotional stability. The characteristics of emotional stability and flexibility were present in the results of both studies, with Pope and Kline's open-mindedness being categorized under flexibility by Nagpal and Ritchie. However, several characteristics in Pope and Kline's list were categorized as interpersonal skills by Nagpal and Ritchie rather than as personal attributes. Other discrepancies include the category of personal maturity identified in Nagpal and Ritchie's study, which included self-awareness and the ability to be present to others, characteristics considered less critical by participants in Pope and Kline's study. Overall, there were some commonalities in the findings of these two studies, but there were also significant differences in the conceptualization and categorization of characteristics.

In their recent research into the personal characteristics considered as part of admissions processes for counsellor education, Gower and Harris (2020) organized their results using similar categories to those of Heinonen and Nissen-Lie (2020), but the characteristics within those categories were different. Intrapersonal characteristics identified in Gower and Harris's research included self-awareness, a growth orientation, flexibility/open-mindedness, professional dedication, and conscientiousness. Interpersonal characteristics included other-awareness, being personable, empathy, a desire to help, and warmth/openness. The descriptions of self-awareness and flexibility/open-mindedness are similar to those of personal maturity and flexibility in Nagpal and Ritchie's (2002) research, and the interpersonal characteristics share some similarities with Nagpal and Ritchie's interpersonal skills (being genuine, open, and attentive). However, there are some notable differences. Nagpal and Ritchie categorized the desire to help and professional dedication as professional attributes, whereas conscientiousness and growth orientation are not featured in the results of Nagpal and Ritchie's research or those of Pope and Kline (1999). Another noteworthy finding of Gower and Harris's research is a characteristic understood to bridge intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics, called in this instance life experience and human understanding. The description of this characteristic of involving wisdom gained from having "lived in the world" (2020, p. 96) has been described in other literature as maturity (Correya & Naachimuthu, 2018; Jennings & Skovholt, 1999), which

demonstrates an ongoing lack of consensus in the definitional understanding of personal characteristics and their categorization.

In addition to a lack of consistency in the characteristics that educators consider important for counsellors in training and the categorization of these characteristics, the characteristics identified in these studies as important for counsellors in training are not entirely consistent with the personal characteristics associated with therapeutic effectiveness. While traits such as open-mindedness, emotional stability, and flexibility are heavily emphasized for trainees, they do not top the list of primary predictors for therapeutic effectiveness. While Heinonen and Nissen-Lie (2020) noted that reflective function was shown to predict therapeutic outcome and Wampold and colleagues (2017) also suggested that “effective therapists are reflective about their professional practice” (p. 46), self-awareness was not explicitly identified as a key characteristic required for enhancing the therapeutic alliance in Norcross and Lambert’s (2018) meta-analysis. This is worth noting given the strong emphasis placed on self-awareness in trainee counsellors.

In the last decade, research on the personal characteristics of trainee counsellors has largely been undertaken in the context of validating assessment measures devised for individual training programs to meet accreditation requirements (Garner et al., 2016; Lambie & Ascher, 2016; Spurgeon et al., 2012; Torres-Rivera et al., 2002). A lack of consistency similar to that observed in the empirical research exists in the personal characteristics included in these measures even though each is based on a review of the literature. There could also be other explanations for the lack of consistency here such as theoretical stance.

In response to repeated calls for consensus regarding the key personal characteristics required of counsellors (McCaughan & Hill, 2015), Christensen and colleagues (2018) conducted a content analysis of retention policies and student evaluation documents utilized in counselling programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) in the U.S. In the seven themes they identified concerning the characteristics expected of students, the most common characteristics were openness to growth, self- and other-awareness, integrity, and emotional stability. The remaining three were flexibility, compassion, and a category called personal style that included traits like positive attitude, authenticity, congruence, optimism, curiosity, patience, and warmth. Interestingly, those characteristics that were strongly correlated with therapeutic effectiveness were all grouped in the category of personal style. Others—namely self- and other-awareness, emotional stability, flexibility, and integrity—are not typically named in the lists of key counsellor characteristics identified in meta-analyses of the relevant research, although they have been mentioned in the outcomes of smaller qualitative studies (Glenn et al., 2015; Jennings & Skovholt, 1999; Richardson et al., 2009; Wheeler, 2000). There is a clear disjunction between the personal characteristics associated with therapeutic effectiveness and the characteristics deemed necessary in counsellor training, with

the strong focus on self-awareness in counsellor training being the most notable (Bager-Charleson, 2012; Christensen et al., 2018; Johns, 2012; Gladding, 2012; McLeod & McLeod, 2014). The link between the characteristics deemed important to focus on in training and those associated with therapeutic effectiveness needs to be clarified to help educators develop an appropriate curriculum and learning environment for trainee counsellors.

Personal Development in Counsellor Training

Currently within counsellor training internationally, conceptualizations of how to include the development of identified personal characteristics in the curriculum vary considerably. In the United Kingdom, the BACP (2020) has created a Counselling Skills Competence Framework that is structured around five areas of competence, two of which are clearly related to the counsellor's personal characteristics: empathy and personal qualities. The personal qualities competence focuses on enhancing self-awareness to better understand and assist the client, self-efficacy, and self-care (BACP, 2020, p. 19). Work on enhancing these qualities, which is called personal development (BACP, 2020), is then included in the curriculum and supported by a body of literature on the topic (Bager-Charleson, 2012; Johns, 2012; McLeod & McLeod, 2014; Rose, 2012). In Australia, following the example of the BACP, the PACFA's (2025a) new accreditation standards and (2025b) accompanying professional competencies explicitly capture personal development in one of their five domains of professional competency: self-awareness, reflection, and personal development. The standards focus on the intended outcomes of the personal development work, which include awareness of conscious and unconscious biases and power, effective self-care strategies, and the ongoing assessment of fitness to practise and maturity. Responsibility for determining appropriate mechanisms for achieving and evidencing these outcomes rests with the program provider. The CCPA's (2021) standards of practice, by comparison, are less specific, providing only a general statement that training programs are to provide opportunities for students to participate in activities intended to promote personal growth and development, with some examples of personal growth activities included.

In the U.S., the term *professional dispositions* is used in discussions of counselor development (Christensen et al., 2018). Professional dispositions encompass more than just personal characteristics and include values, beliefs, and behaviours (CACREP, 2024). This term avoids some of the challenges inherent in conceptualizing personal characteristics through the acknowledgement that some may be behaviours rather than characterological. CACREP has more explicit expectations regarding personal development than those seen elsewhere, with CACREP-accredited programs required to identify key dispositions expected of their trainee counsellors and to measure these regularly throughout a trainee's program. Some programs have published details of how dispositions are integrated

into their programs (Gibbons et al., 2013; Cato College of Education, n.d.), but there remains a lack of consistency in how this is approached (Haddock et al., 2020). Despite stipulations in various training standards that dispositions be progressively assessed or that personal development work be incorporated into counselling programs, it is evident that there is limited evidence in the available literature of how this is actually being carried out.

Perhaps there is limited evidence of how personal development work is being approached in counselling programs due to ambiguity in the conceptual literature regarding the nature of personal development work for trainee counsellors (McLeod & McLeod, 2014). Donati and Watts (2005) addressed the lack of conceptual clarity regarding personal development by reviewing several definitions of the term, noting that personal development has sometimes been conflated with personal growth. They suggested that while personal growth emphasizes the counsellor's own well-being and professional development is concerned with technical skills and competencies, personal development exists on a spectrum between these two poles and affects both. Personal development is defined as "a purposeful, specifiable and structured activity, which seeks to develop discrete skills or qualities, whose effects can either be 'positive' or 'negative' or transitory, and whose main focus is to enhance a trainee's professional effectiveness" (Donati & Watts, 2005, p. 479). Consistent themes across other definitions emphasize the importance of self-awareness, an ongoing commitment to critical reflection on both life experience and professional practice, and the purposeful nature of personal development in the service of clients, as opposed to personal growth as an end in itself (Bager-Charleson, 2012; Johns, 2012; McLeod & McLeod, 2014). These three aspects of personal development will guide the ensuing discussion.

Beginning with the importance of self-awareness, it is recognized that personal development both relies on self-awareness and seeks to enhance self-awareness (BACP, 2020; Donati & Watts, 2005; Johns, 2012). Some inherent self-awareness is required for counsellors to be able to engage productively in personal development activities. According to the BACP (2020), self-awareness enables trainee counsellors to identify and utilize helpful personal characteristics and to address characteristics that may not be so helpful in the counselling relationship. This is supported by research into the effects of the two most common strategies used in counselling programs in countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia on the personal development of trainee counsellors: mandated counselling and personal development groups (Johns, 2012). Participants in personal development groups have reported increased self-awareness, including becoming aware of personal blind spots, potential triggers, and vulnerabilities; other reported benefits include increased awareness of others and enhanced interpersonal skills, particularly empathy (McMahon & Rodillas, 2020; Moller & Rance, 2013). Murphy and colleagues' (2018) systematic review of the research on mandated therapy during psychotherapy and counselling training revealed that therapy increased

self-awareness and emotional resilience and enhanced trainees' authenticity. Of equal interest was the finding that mandatory therapy is a powerful means of experiential learning and that perhaps this should be the priority rather than seeing therapy as a reparative measure (Murphy et al., 2018). Viewing mandatory therapy primarily as a learning tool aligns more closely with the themes in personal development work identified above and with Johns's (2012) pronouncement that the use of therapy in training should always be for the purpose of being better able to service one's clients.

Some programs approach personal development either by outsourcing it to mandated counselling groups entirely disconnected from the training or by treating it implicitly, under the assumption that it will occur naturally as an automatic result of the education process. Other programs make personal development an explicit focus, however, by including experiential class activities and structured writing tasks that involve self-reflection throughout the program (Cohen et al., 2022; Johns, 2012; McLeod & McLeod, 2014; Mearns, 1997; Pieterse et al., 2013). Key to learning from activities like these is ensuring that all stages of the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984)—exploration, reflection, conceptualization, and action—are addressed. Donati and Watts' (2005) definition of personal development reminds us that exploration and reflection by themselves can increase self-awareness but are insufficient for personal development. Action based on learning from experience and considering the implications of new insights for client work is what differentiates personal development from personal growth. The outcome of personal development should be the capacity to be more useful to one's clients (McLeod & McLeod, 2014), which clearly implies that personal development should not be treated implicitly or separately from the rest of a training program.

Concerning the U.S., where training providers are required to assess student dispositions at several points across a trainee's program, Dollarhide (2013) recognized that dispositions could be innate or learned, but they do need to be taught. There is some evidence that integrating dispositions into a program by including them in policy documents and explicitly addressing them in class can have a positive impact on students (Dollarhide, 2013; Spurgeon et al., 2012). However, even among programs where educators have developed and published research on their own evaluation forms, approaches to implementation remain inconsistent (Kemer et al., 2017). The limited detail available regarding implementation indicates that these evaluation forms seem to be predominantly utilized by educators to assess trainees' progress at various stages of their training program and that these forms are heavily reliant on the observation of trainees in different contexts. These observations are then used as the basis for remedial work if necessary (Haddock et al., 2020; Cato College of Education, n.d.). Barrio Minton and colleagues (2016) recommended that dispositions should be assessed "throughout coursework, clinical experiences, as well as part of ongoing

student review and retention procedures” (p. 75). There is limited discussion in the literature of approaches to addressing these dispositions in coursework. Gibbons and colleagues’ (2013) research into student responses to the introduction of dispositions in counsellor training found the implicit modelling of dispositions by educators in the culture of the program to be effective for promoting their development in students, but that teaching on dispositions should also be spread throughout their entire curriculum. Unfortunately, despite several books being devoted to the topic of the personal development of counsellors (Bager-Charleson, 2012; Johns, 2012; McLain & Lewis, 2019; McLeod & McLeod, 2014; Rose, 2012), there remains a surprising lack of research on the experiences, processes, and strategies that promote personal development in trainee counsellors (Cohen et al., 2022; Kiweewa et al., 2013; Pieterse et al., 2013).

Personal development during counsellor training requires active participation from trainees, and while neural plasticity makes it possible for people to grow in self-awareness (Siegel, 2010), a reflective temperament is advisable for those entering training (Rønnestad & Orlinsky, 2005). It is reasonable to assume that self-awareness underpins and supports the development of personal characteristics key to counselling effectiveness such as the use of constructive coping strategies to manage difficulties, the ability to manage counter-transference, the expression of professional self-doubt, and the commitment to ongoing learning that is expressed in deliberate practice (Norcross & Lambert, 2018; Orlinsky & Rønnestad, 2005; Wampold et al., 2017), but there is no clear research evidence supporting this assumption.

It is also understandable that some level of emotional stability, another characteristic considered important for training, would be required to face the hard work involved in personal development, along with an openness to new experiences (Christensen et al., 2018). Perhaps this explains why these particular characteristics figure more prominently in lists devised for counsellors in training. Johns (2012) went so far as to say that counselling training should come with a “health warning” (p. 179), in light of the fact that personal development activities can be somewhat disruptive and sometimes destabilizing. This has implications for the admissions processes for counsellor training programs. More clarity is needed regarding the personal characteristics required to cope with the rigors of personal development and professional counselling training.

Implications and Recommendations

A review of the literature reveals that while the personal characteristics of counsellors have been the topic of considerable discussion and research over the last 30+ years, there remains no consensus on what the key characteristics of effective counsellors are (Heinonen & Nissen-Lie, 2020). Nor is there consensus on the characteristics required of counsellors in training (Christensen et al., 2018; McCaughan & Hill, 2015). We support Christensen and colleagues’ (2018) call

for a Delphi study using the disposition categories found within their study as a positive step toward greater consensus. Such a study could also be useful for countries other than the U.S. to explore and could capture some of the varied perspectives held by individuals with different roles in the counsellor training process.

Conceptualizations vary widely, with some lists including a combination of innate qualities, behaviours, and skills (Glenn et al., 2015; Gower & Harris, 2020; Nagpal & Ritchie, 2002). It is possible that while some people have focused on naming the key characteristics of effective counsellors, others think more in terms of the visible manifestations of specific characteristics. Another difference is noted between people who are focused on the fundamental characteristics required for effective counselling practice and people who are exploring more complex concepts such as professional self-doubt and deliberate practice. Further research conducted through a critical realism lens (Danermark et al., 2002) might offer a helpful framework to address this conceptual variation. Critical realism claims that there are different layers of reality in which complex entities such as key counsellor characteristics can be known. One level consists of our perceptions, observations, and experiences of students' attitudes and behaviour (like professional self-doubt and deliberate practice), which can admittedly be difficult to measure empirically due to their subjective nature. On another level of reality that asks deeper questions about what must be true for something to exist (Easton, 2010), it should be possible to identify principles that drive personal development and the mechanisms that generate or enhance key personal characteristics. Such mechanisms might include self-reflection or a proactive attitude. Utilizing these mechanisms could provide a cohesive framework for organizing different conceptualizations of personal characteristics like deliberate practice and the reflectivity that it seems to rely on, which would reduce some of the challenges caused by the multiplicity of terms. Identifying some of these generative mechanisms might assist in identifying the more fundamental characteristics required of trainee counsellors, in addition to clarifying effective strategies for developing these characteristics.

Increased conceptual clarity might assist in discerning what characteristics can be developed during training and what are considered innate. Despite repeated calls for more research on this topic (Christensen et al., 2018; Heinonen & Nissen-Lie, 2020; McCaughan & Hill, 2015), there remains a need for greater consensus on what personal characteristics are fundamental for entry to training and what characteristics students are expected to develop during their training. It is expected that there will be some variation based on each program's counselling philosophy, which could explain why CACREP (2024) directs U.S. counselling programs to identify the dispositions they consider important for their trainees to develop. While training programs' personal development content needs to

be consistent with their underlying philosophy (Irving & Williams, 1999), we propose that some uniformity across training programs should be achievable.

Despite entire texts having been written on personal development, there remains a lack of consistency regarding definitions and purposes of personal development work in counsellor training. Training standards internationally also lack consistency regarding personal development, and some standards are vague regarding the nature of personal development required of trainees. Before any steps could be taken to achieve a more unified approach to personal development, it is recommended that further research be undertaken to clarify exactly what is happening in training programs regarding personal development—the strategies being utilized and their expected outcomes. This includes whether personal development is part of the teaching curriculum or whether it is expected to take place outside the classroom context. It is suggested that research be undertaken to assess the efficacy of personal development opportunities within counsellor training programs and the ways in which counsellor educators assess this for themselves. One research suggestion would be to conduct in-depth interviews with various stakeholders (e.g., trainees, educators, supervisors, and employers) that could provide more support for observational strategies where there is agreement between the various perspectives. Divergent perspectives would demonstrate a need to explore more reliable strategies for assessing personal development (Norcross & Lambert, 2018). Further examination of international approaches to personal development within counsellor training programs would also be instructive to see what approaches are proving to be effective in different countries.

In the interests of greater transparency and as a helpful step toward achieving greater consistency within counsellor training, educators should be encouraged to clarify the characteristics they are seeking to develop in their trainees, to operationalize those characteristics, and to assess the effectiveness of the personal development strategies they are employing (Barrio Minton et al., 2016; Gibbons et al., 2013; Swank & Smith-Adcock, 2014). Personal development goals and outcomes can be mapped the same way all program outcomes are mapped, with consideration given to how they will be addressed throughout the training program. In light of Gibbons and colleagues' (2013) advice regarding best practice, it is suggested that program information detail how and where desired personal characteristics (or dispositions) are to be modelled and how and where they are taught and assessed. It is anticipated that doing so will assist with addressing concerns about trainees' fitness to practise and strengthening gatekeeping processes.

Fitness to practise and gatekeeping issues are also relevant to those bodies that are responsible for the accreditation of counsellor training in various jurisdictions and that are ultimately responsible for setting training standards, including expectations for personal development work. Where there is vagueness within training standards, training providers can advocate for greater clarity and more

guidance, including the provision of a clear rationale for personal development work within counsellor training. Having more consensus on the personal characteristics required for training and further discussion of the different characteristics appropriate to different theoretical orientations and/or types of counselling would also be helpful.

Conclusion

Current conceptualizations of the key personal characteristics associated with therapeutic effectiveness have been compared, and this comparison has highlighted a lack of consensus in the research. This lack of consensus is compounded when we consider the characteristics considered important for counsellors in training. Divergent approaches to addressing counsellors' personal characteristics in training have been noted, along with a lack of clarity regarding definitions and expectations of this work. While discussion regarding the cultivation of trainees' personal characteristics is most commonly referred to as personal development in the conceptual literature (Bager-Charleson, 2012; Donati & Watts, 2005; Johns, 2012; McLeod & McLeod, 2014), understandings of expected outcomes and research supporting effective processes and strategies are limited. An attempt has been made to clarify different approaches to personal development while calling for a more unified approach to this important aspect of counsellor training. It is hoped that clarifying the current situation and the gaps in common understandings of personal development for counsellors will stimulate further discussion and research in this key area of counsellor training.

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