Professional Identity and Counsellor Education

Bryan Hiebert
Liz Simpson
University of Calgary
Max R. Uhlemann
University of Victoria

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide a perspective on the current sense of professional identity amongst counsellors and counselling psychologists in Canada, with the hope of encouraging more attention to this issue amongst counsellors, counselling psychologists, and counsellor educators. Findings from a pilot survey on professional identity suggest that the three groups agree on the definition of counselling psychology, but there are considerable discrepancies between the perceptions and practices of all three groups. As well, there is little agreement on how counselling psychology is similar to or different from other helping professions. Conclusions and implications of these findings for the development of a more clear professional identity are discussed.

Résumé

Le but de cet article est de présenter une perspective du courant de l'identité professionnelle parmi les conseillers et les conseillers psychologues au Canada, avec l'intention d'attirer l'attention sur ce problème entre les conseillers, les conseillers psychologues et les conseillers éducateurs. Les résultats de cette enquête pilote sur l'identité professionnelle suggère que les trois groupes s'entendent sur la définition de la psychologie du counseling, mais qu'il y a des différences considérables entre les perceptions et les pratiques des trois groupes. De plus, il y a peu d'entente sur comment la psychologie du counseling est semblable ou différente des autres professions d'aide. Des conclusions et les implications de ces résultats pour le développement d'une identité professionnelle plus claire sont discutées.

The identity of the counselling profession currently is diffuse and undifferentiated—in fact, one could say that counselling psychology is in the throes of an identity crisis. The counselling profession is pulled in many directions. It owes allegiance to education and psychology as foundational disciplines. It must address stakeholder interests in provincial government departments, local school boards, and public and private sector agencies, and to the public at large. If counselling is to flourish as a profession it must have a clear sense of its own identity and the development of that identity must be seen as an integral part of counsellor preparation programs. The purpose of this paper is to provide some background pertinent to developing a sense of professional identity amongst counsellors and counselling psychologists in the hopes that it will foster more attention to this issue amongst counsellors and counsellor educators.

The academic affiliation of counselling adds to its identity confusion. Within universities, counselling is taught in Faculties of Education and

Departments of Educational Psychology, Psychology, Counsellor Educa-
tion, and Counselling and Human Development. In the United States
more than 20 Departments of Counselling Psychology exist compared to
only one in Canada (Friesen, 1983). Most commonly, counsellor educa-
tion programs have been housed in Faculties of Education despite the
fact that counselling psychology exists as a psychology specialty (Meara et
al., 1988; Whitely, 1984; Zytowski & Rosen, 1982).

Even the name counselling psychology connotes confusion because
counselling is both a process and a scientifically based discipline
(Friesen, 1983; Zytowski & Rosen, 1982). Thus, 'counselling' is not
exclusive to 'counsellors' and the title 'counsellor' has enjoyed liberal
application. In Canada there are more than 15 national professional
associations who express stakeholder interest in career counselling
(Hiebert, in press), and the number would undoubtedly be much
greater should counselling be viewed in its more generic state. In the
United States, there are counselling sections or divisions in every major
professional association affiliated with either psychology or education.
Such diversity of professional affiliation shows that counselling psycholo-
gists do not have a clear identity (Whitely, 1984).

Historically, counselling psychology has its roots in vocational assis-
tance, psychometrics and measurement, the mental hygiene movement,
and the work of Carl Rogers. At the Greystone conference in 1964,
counselling psychology declared its allegiance to two roots, psychology
and education, and its intent to develop as an organized applied-
scientific specialty (Whitely, 1984, p. 31). The scientist-practitioner had
three roles, prevention, education, and remediation (Morrill, Oetting &
Hurst, 1974; Whitely, 1984), with education being of primary importance
(64% of the members listed education as their primary occupational
setting), followed by prevention, and remediation.

In order to differentiate counselling psychology from other profes-
sions Ivey (in Whitely, 1984) coined the term 'psychoeducator,' and
counselling psychologists were encouraged to produce more research to
strengthen their professional credibility (Whitely, 1984). Over the years,
however, there has been a movement away from counselling psychology's
developmental roots (Fitzgerald & Osipow, 1986; Tipton, 1984; Watkins,
1983; Watkins, Lopez, Campbell & Himmell, 1986). Graduates of coun-
selling psychology programs now are employed in a broad range of
settings, mostly service oriented, with a remedial focus. In addition,
private practice is emerging as a trend among new graduates (Tip-
ton,1984, p. 112) and very few counselling psychologists are involved in
research, which contradicts Whitely's (1984) view of a "data-oriented
problem solver" and the scientist-practitioner model (Fitzgerald & Os-
ipow, 1986). Although older counselling psychologists report doing
more career-oriented counselling, younger counsellors seem more likely

to be employed in private practice or counselling psychologists centres and engage in more remedial tasks, which they consider more important (Fitzgerald & Osipow, 1986; Watkins et al., 1986).

It is important to note that Wakins et al. (1986) found that only 47% of counsellors would choose counselling psychology as a career again and given a choice 30% stated their preference would be clinical psychology or psychiatry. Although the majority of subjects identified themselves as counselling psychologists, they viewed themselves primarily as clinical practitioners. The small percentage of clincial psychologists, who appeared in the sample because of dual membership in both clinical and counselling sections of the APA, did not appear to have this identity confusion. These data underscore our earlier contention that counselling psychologists are confused about their roles.

<div align="center">THE CANADIAN SCENE</div>

To determine counsellor and counselling psychologist views of their professional identity, a pilot survey was undertaken (Hiebert & Uhlemann, in press). A six-page, open-ended questionnaire was distributed to all members of the Counsellor Educators Chapter of the Canadian Guidance and Counselling Association (CGCA) and the Counselling Psychology Section of the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA). The questionnaire addressed areas such as: definitions of counselling psychology, areas of practice, similarities and differences compared to other professions, future directions, professional affiliation, and basic demographic information. Based on the low return rates encountered in surveys of professional identity with other professional groups (cf. Sinclair, Poizner, Gilmor-Barrett & Randall, 1987; Spokane & Hawkes, 1990) and the lengthy open-ended nature of the questionnaire, we did not expect a high return rate. In the end, 23 usable forms were returned, representing a 9% return rate. Thus, the description below is probably best viewed as the perspective of 23 of our peers, rather than a representative sampling of professionals.

For the most part, the data portrayed a somewhat inconsistent and contradictory picture of professional identity, with relatively little agreement across disciplines. For example, the CPA and CGCA membership lists contained only 21 names in common, suggesting that professionals see themselves as psychologists or counsellors, but not both. When asked to indicate their primary and secondary professional affiliation, 16 indicated counselling psychologist as either primary or secondary affiliation, 9 indicated counsellor, and 3 indicated counsellor educator. Seven people indicated counselling psychologist as their primary affiliation and counsellor as secondary (or vice versa), 2 indicated counsellor educator as primary and counselling psychologist as secondary, while no counsellor educator indicated counsellor as a secondary professional

affiliation. It would seem that our respondents saw themselves as either counselling *psychologists* or counsellors, but not both, and few of them saw themselves as counsellor educators.

Generally speaking, all three groups of respondents agreed that counselling psychology involved working with "normal" (vs. pathological) clients, living in community (rather than institutional) settings, who were experiencing any number of developmental life issues or personal life crises. However, the areas of practice identified by respondents was not consistent with the definition. Most of their case loads involved clients who presented remedial or rehabilitative concerns, where the focus was on attempting to resolve a discrepancy between the demands or problems people face and their skills for dealing with those problems. There was little emphasis on developmental or preventative work with clients. This would suggest that Canadian counsellors and counselling psychologists are spending most of their time in what might be termed "salvage" operations, rather than preparing their clients with the sorts of skills that would produce lasting change or prevent typical life demands from becoming problematic. Although a psychoeducational approach is implicit in most definitions of counselling psychology and consistent with the thinking of our respondents, the practice of our sample would imply more of a deficit model aimed at remediation.

It is interesting to note the differences in perception of "the other" by both counselling psychologists and counsellors. Generally speaking, counselling psychologists saw themselves as being guided more by research and theory in their practice, a view supported by the counsellor educators group. However, counsellors did not see that distinction. Counsellors saw counselling psychologists as having more training, but not being more likely to be guided in their practice by either theory or research. This difference in perception suggests that the scientist-practitioner model, which has been an integral part of counselling psychology (cf. Howard, 1985; Whitely, 1984), may not be as evident in the practice of those who espouse its allegiance as many would have us believe. Along the same lines, several writers (Carkhuff, 1968; Gelso, 1979; Hiebert, 1988; Walton, 1982) have pointed out that the publication rates of counselling psychologists is abysmally low, with the modal rate being less than one article per year, even amongst university-based counsellor educators. Therefore, it would seem that a conceptual chasm may exist between the espoused "modus operandi" and the actual practice of counselling psychologists and counsellor educators.

IMPLICATIONS

The trend towards remediation in the practice of counsellors and counselling psychologists is cause for concern, for as Sprinthall (1990) points out, it leaves those who have the greatest need out of the service loop

(p. 460). Remediation supports the status quo and fails populations by requiring clients to adjust to prevailing conditions (Drum, 1987). Education and prevention, identified as primary tenets of the counselling profession, are a hard sell in an era of short term gain (Coons, 1990), but they are "the best investment of time and money that society can make" (Lecomte, Dumont & Zingle, 1981, p. 14). Watkins (1983) predicted that counselling psychology's days are numbered if they continue to ignore the role of prevention and education. Moreover, the choice to become remedial practitioners has left the door open for others to take on counselling's traditional role and clinical psychologists are showing interest in vocational and career counselling (Fitzgerald & Osipow, 1986) and health education (Coons, 1990).

The relatively low level of research referred to earlier implies the demise of the scientist focus in scientist-practitioner, which traditionally was thought to be central to the role of counselling psychologists. Martin (1988) warns of the consequences of working without a scientific base, pointing out that science in fact means knowledge. He reiterates Whitely's (1984) call to strengthen the scientist-practitioner model with increased research production and a refocussing of counsellor training (Martin, 1988). We would concur, and add that support for the scientist-practitioner model requires counselling psychology and counsellor education programs to emphasize the interdependence of theory, research, and practice (Meara et al., 1988).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

To say the professional identity of counselling psychology in Canada is fuzzy is an understatement. Although there is reasonable agreement between counselling psychologists, counsellors, and counsellor educators on the definition of counselling psychology, there are large discrepancies between the definitions and the practices of all three groups, and little agreement on how counselling psychology is similar to or different from other helping professions. Upon reflection, it is small wonder that such confusion and discrepancy exists when we see the attention given to the development of professional identity in counselling psychology and counsellor training programs.

When we harken back to memories of experiences we had during our graduate training in counselling it is hard to remember even one time when we discussed what it meant to be a counselling psychologist (or a counsellor)—what sorts of roles we wanted to carve out for ourselves in the professional world, and how our philosophy, basic assumptions, or ways of operating might be similar to or different from other related professions. To confuse matters even more, there was an explicit, or at least implicit, attitude that the "best" practicum placements were in places that had the most disturbed clients. Students in school settings or

community agencies were thought to have relatively easy and un-challenging placements, whereas those in mental health clinics or men-tal hospital out-patient clinics were thought to have the placements where *real* counselling took place. In talking to students in various counsellor education programs across the country over the years, it seems that a similar attitude exists in the majority of programs. Increas-ingly, this seems to us like a strange perception to foster in a program that claims to prepare people to work in a profession that focuses on "normal" clients.

The implied superior status of clinical psychology in the above obser-vations is ironic, for it comes at a time when clinical psychology is becoming more counselling in its focus. Thus, counselling students seek after clinical placements with disturbed clients, while clinical psycholo-gists are discovering vocational psychology and career development, two central areas of practice traditionally belonging to counselling. It would seem that there is some danger in loosing our turf in the professional arena if we do not have a clear sense of who we are, and where we are going professionally, and then take pains to focus our attention on the provision of superior service in our chosen domains. Some would say the move to remediation is driven in part to third party reimbursement. We would counter that counsellors should not be modifying their services to meet the reimbursers but instead educating them about their funding priorities (Drum, 1987).

It appears that the root of the identity crisis may be "counselling psychology's attempts to live in a divided house" (Watkins, 1988, p. 444). Counselling psychology is floundering between education and psychol-ogy and in its efforts to retain itself as a psychological specialty has lost its primary focus. Paradoxically, the profession is hanging on to the disci-pline that supports it the least. What is certain is that helping professions arise out of and are shaped by socio-economic forces (Whitely, 1984), and counselling psychology will continue to face new challenges, in particular accountability to an increasingly consumer oriented society (Coons, 1990). It is clear to us that if counselling psychology continues to flounder on the identity issue, it will remain an 'adolescent' unclear of its own place in the grand scheme of things, which some say will be its demise (Watkins, 1983).

In closing we would like to say that we view clarifying professional identity as providing a long term goal that helps to focus peoples' attention on how they choose to spend their professional time, where they allocate their resources, what sorts of clients they seek, the kinds of funding proposals they submit, and the kind of professional develop-ment they pursue. It is a counselling psychologist's (or counsellor's) sense of professional identity that provides the vision which guides long-term goal setting and continuing professional development. We believe

that the future survival of our profession hinges on the extent to which a solid sense of professional identity is developed in counsellor trainees. Hence, it is important for counsellor educators and counsellor education programs to map out their vision of the sort of professional they are preparing, and afterwards, to make sure their program structure and their own personal demeanour models that identity. The scientist-practitioner model is transtheoretical and this is perhaps a logically appealing approach. However, it would seem that many who currently espouse the model are not behaving consistently with it. We feel it is time for national dialogue on what it means to be a counsellor, and how that relates to counselling psychology, and to other related helping professions. Such a dialogue would help us all to clarify our thoughts on this very important issue, and leave our profession stronger for the future.

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Address correspondence to: Dr. Bryan Hiebert, Department of Educational Psychology, Faculty of Education, University of Calgary, 2500 University Drive N.W., Calgary, Alberta T2N 1N4.