
The Place for Research in Counsellors' Education

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Abstract

A distinction is maintained in most universities which offer graduate studies in counselling, between professional and research degrees, both at the masters and doctorate levels. This distinction is related to two widespread misconceptions concerning: 1) what being a professional in the human sciences field means; 2) what is or should be considered as research in this field. The author contends that counsellors cannot avoid being researchers and thus being trained as such because of the research activity basically involved in their activity as practitioners. Counsellor educators are confronted with the task of offering new and more adequate models and methodologies for researchers relevant to their specific field.

Résumé

La distinction qui est perpétuée dans la majorité des universités qui offrent des programmes d'études avancées en counseling, entre la formation destinée aux futur-e-s praticien-ne-s et celle destinée aux futur-e-s chercheur-e-s, et ceci tant au niveau de la maîtrise qu'à celui du doctorat, repose en fait sur deux malentendus majeurs concernant: 1) la pratique professionnelle dans le domaine des sciences humaines; 2) la définition de la recherche scientifique dans ce domaine. L'auteure soutient que les conseillères et conseillers sont appelé-e-s de par la nature même de leur activité professionnelle à agir en tant que chercheur-e-s et qu'il leur faut par conséquent être formé dans ce sens. Elle estime aussi qu'une des tâches urgentes qui incombent, à cet égard, aux personnes chargées de la formation des conseillères et des conseillers consiste à développer de nouveaux modèles de recherche, et des méthodologies rigoureuses, pertinents aux sujets de recherche liés à la pratique du counseling.

Anybody who has participated in counsellor education knows that students who register in our programs in order to become professional counsellors are eager to learn techniques. Their hunger for techniques seems at times impossible to satiate. They want to master the know-how and for beginners the know-how equates with technical knowledge. But when it comes to theory, the level of counselling students' enthusiasm drops dramatically. And things usually get worse if, instead of merely having to learn theories, they are confronted with the task of trying to evaluate them, to read and criticize research reports and even . . . to do some research work themselves.

The multiplicity of techniques does not seem to frighten them. They tend to think of techniques as something concrete: you use it and if it works you keep it, if it doesn't you discard it. But they seem awed by the multiplicity of theories. They do not know how to pick one for themselves. Usually we tell them that it has first to be congruent with the philosophy and values one holds, that this is what will really attract them to a theory anyhow.

But even when counselling students are convinced of the necessity and usefulness of having a theoretical frame for their practice, they don't really see why they should be bothered by research. And sometimes it is

not obvious that all counsellor educators are convinced of the necessity to put much emphasis on research in counsellors' education. Questions are issued regularly not only from students but from some faculty members also, concerning the necessity of an extensive research training. After all, one can hear them argue, they do not intend to become researchers, but practitioners.

Actually, this distinction between researchers and practitioners is taken into account in many universities which offer two programs for graduate students at the masters degree level. Students can register for a type A or a type B masters degree, which respectively entails the obligation for the type A student to go through a long supervised clinical training and to do a relatively short "research work" and for the type B student to undertake a much longer research work.

At my university, there is no distinction of that sort at the doctorate level. This means that the training of candidates for Ph.D. focuses exclusively on research. Things are intended to be that way and few people question the pertinence of that kind of training. People who register in our program know what to expect and they usually think of themselves as future researchers. But occasionally we are confronted with candidates who would like to study beyond the masters degree level, but who do not intend, as they say, to become researchers. They are committed to the practice of counselling and they want to keep on studying it. They do not want to be trained as researchers, and they do not want to have to undertake a long research work and write a thesis. They would like to be able to register for a professional doctorate . . . And a professional doctorate is what they can actually get in some universities.

I, personally, have always been puzzled by such a request as I am puzzled by the distinction between research and practice we continue to make at the masters degree level. It seems to me to be directly related to widespread and major misconceptions of 1) what being a professional in the human sciences field means and 2) what is or should be considered as research in this field.

What being a professional in the human sciences field means

Everybody agrees that a professional is a person who understands the theoretical foundations of the act he or she performs. In the field of traditional science — the physical sciences for instance — there is usually, for every involved discipline, one prevailing theory at a time. Practitioners must understand it well, in addition to gaining a sound training in the scientific methods and techniques specific to their field, in order to be able to perform their work and to read the scientific and professional literature. A bachelors degree in physical engineering, for instance, will ensure the attainment of this objective and enable a person to work as a professional in her or his field. But if this person wants to be hired in a

position which requires the performing of research work, he or she will have to first get a masters or a doctorate degree. Nobody usually questions such a necessity.

In the human sciences things are basically different, because practitioners like counsellors have to be trained in many disciplines. In each of these disciplines there are many competing theories. As professionals they will not only have to learn many theories but they will have to criticize them, to test their limits, and verify their validity, the degree of their comprehensiveness, their ability to account for the multiplicity and complexity of human experiences, their usefulness etc. In this sense, professionals have no choice but to be researchers. After certification, they will continue to read and criticize the scientific and professional literature published in their field. (Paradoxically, because the sort of knowledge counsellors base their practice on lacks in accuracy or in a traditional sense of objective knowledge, they must be more inclined to be scientists themselves.) Moreover, every time counsellors interact with clients they act as researchers.* Every time they listen to a client they use their complex, multidimensional theoretical frame to make a hypothesis. They keep some of their hypotheses, discard some, and reformulate others. When they think the time is right, they share some of their hypotheses with the client, and must be able to make new ones concerning his or her reaction to their ideas. At the same time, counsellors have to be aware of the effect the interaction with the client has on their own feelings, thinking and behaviour. These too are the objects of hypotheses and theoretical understanding. Finally, whether things work well or go wrong, counsellors have to formulate hypotheses about the results they think they have got. They must know how to evaluate their professional activities and how to better them.

What I am outlining here is something every counsellor educator is perfectly aware of. *I think, however, that the emphasis we put on feelings and on attitude training tends sometimes to make our students forget that they must be, to a certain extent, theoreticians, and, as such, have to be trained to do research work.* This is the main reason why we insist that they should get a masters degree before being allowed to counsel on a professional basis. I think the misunderstanding or misconception concerning their professional responsibility lies there: in the underevaluation of the research activity basically involved in their work.

What the doctorate degree should enable them to do is to contribute to theory building and renovation. This is why every student, at this level, should give evidence not only of the mastery of his or her field of knowledge and research methodology, but of his or her ability for innovative thinking. *Systematic, verifiable, rigorous and innovative* — those

* That is if they want to be the reflective practitioner Schon (1983) has so brilliantly described.

are the qualities we expect to find in a thesis or a doctoral dissertation. Those are the characteristics which qualify the candidate's work as a scientific research work. Whenever we can find these qualities in a dissertation, we should be satisfied that the candidate has had the research training we expect. The research object can be many very different things. It can pertain to any aspect of counselling or discipline directly or indirectly involved in counselling. The research model may vary. But the fundamental qualities I have outlined should always be present, because without them there is a danger of stagnation, or of unverifiable, spur-of-the-moment innovations, or of (to say the least) a very limited interest.

But then we are confronted with the second or, I should say, the basic misunderstanding. This misunderstanding concerns the nature of research in the human sciences field. It is the misunderstanding from which many others stem, including the one just discussed.

What is considered as research in the human sciences field

I have no doubts that a consensus exists in academic circles concerning the qualities expected to be present in a scientific research work. The prevalent research model in the academic world is a positivistic one. If we accept this prevalence, however, we accept a very narrow definition of what deserves to be considered as scientific research.

The positivistic model postulates the existence of an observer and of an object of observation which are separated from each other, in order to ensure that scientific objectivity will be respected. It is experimental or quasi-experimental, which means that one has to control the variables, and distinguish between dependent and independent variables. Research conducted according to this model is also quantitative, to allow for accurate measurement and prediction. This pattern may interest some candidates who are concerned by experimental psychology, and by laboratory type research, where one has control over the intervening variables, usually very limited in number, and can make accurate measurements. However, when we examine the kind of issues practitioners are usually confronted by or interested in, we can see that:

a) What they are dealing with, most of the time, are complex phenomena which cannot be fragmented without losing their meaning. The data they gather is of the qualitative type. The phenomena can be measured only in approximate ways, even if they can be extensively and accurately described.

b) The distinction between the observer and the object of observation can by no means be maintained. Both the research object and the researcher are two subjects, and they are both affected and will be transformed by every step of the research situation and procedures.

c) Predictability cannot be achieved, except in a very broad sense. Human beings are too complex to be entirely explained through multiple

but always limited and fragmentary observations, and thus the fragmentary theories which the human sciences allow us to make. Also, human beings are fundamentally free.

This freedom, however, does not mean that we cannot and should not try to understand human behaviour. It only means that the more we systematically observe it, the more able we are to depict certain combinations of elements, or gestalt that may account for different types of behaviour, feelings, or states of mind etc. Systematic observations and classifications may lead to typologies and partial explanations. But even the best of the typologies cannot encompass the entirety of human complexity and certainly will not help us to deal with the issue of human freedom. We have to admit that we cannot think of human sciences in the terms and with the norms we have inherited from the physical sciences.

The above statements do not imply that we can do without rigour. Observations have to be rigorous, and objectivity should be aimed at. Not neutrality. That leaves us with the question of how to achieve these qualities. How to undertake research work which takes into account both the subjects' and the researcher's subjectivity without ending with results which are nothing but the ones we more or less consciously wanted to get in the first place. How to undertake rigorous qualitative analysis. How to go beyond the singular and be able to build a kind of knowledge that can be used by others, that can be — to a certain extent — generalized?

Some tentative elements of answer

I would like to submit the following for discussion:

1) Our science is a science of subjects, so subjectivity and interaction have to be studied.

2) Each time we counsel a client what we are doing can be labeled research-action, thus that sort of research should be considered as perfectly relevant in counsellors' education.

3) The main objective of the scientific education we offer is to help students develop a relevant and rigorous methodology for the study not only of common phenomena, but of singular individuals with unique characteristics. Each time we understand a singular human being, we enrich our knowledge of what it means to be human. Research concerning one single subject should be considered perfectly suitable in our domain, insofar as the concentration on one individual allow us to take into account the multiple facets of his or her experience and to try to understand and explain the ways these factors combine and interact.

4) Even if the ultimate aim in any science is the building of the most comprehensive theory possible, we have to admit that when it comes to explaining or predicting human behaviour, we are as yet very far from

this objective. The best we can do is to encourage multidisciplinary in counsellors' education, to encourage specificity, modesty, and the avoidance of hasty generalizations. We should welcome research which tries to explain very specific situations, without much possibility for generalization, as we should welcome descriptive research whenever our knowledge concerning a phenomena is still very limited.

5) Most of the data we gather in our research is of the verbal type. Our interactions with our clients are largely verbal. We have to develop rigorous methodologies for discourse analysis or draw on existing ones (structural analysis for instance) for this task. We need methodologies which leave no place for mere impressions or hasty interpretations. Because part of the interaction which takes place between persons is non-verbal communication we also need rigorous methods for analyzing this kind of communication.

6) Finally, counsellors are involved in the business of helping people change. So we have to encourage the development of an adequate methodology for the study of the process of change.

Rather than narrowing counsellors' training we should broaden our definition of scientific research. By focusing on methodological rigour and relevance we can make a place for the scientific study of the kind of issues and problems practitioners are interested in and consider it as a perfectly suitable research training.

References

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