NEW DIRECTIONS FOR COMPETENCIES
IN COUNSELLOR EDUCATION[1]

STEPHEN E. MARKS, SHARON E. KAHN, and ROBERT J. TOLSMA
Department of Counselling Psychology, University of British Columbia

Abstract

The use of competencies in counsellor education has been complicated by lack of agreement on the most important areas of counsellor competence and the categories into which competencies may be placed. In addition there is no agreement as to the form in which the competency statements themselves are written. The adoption of a standard category system and a standard format for writing competency statements is recommended to improve the research and implementation of competencies in counsellor education.

Résumé

L'utilisation de compétence dans l'éducation de conseillers a été davantage compliqué par le manque d'entente sur les plus importants domaines de compétences en counselling et des catégories dans lesquelles chacunes pourraient être classée. En plus, on ne s'entend pas sur la forme que doit prendre l'expression écrite des compétences. L'établissement de normes pour le système de catégories et pour le format de l'expression écrite des compétences est proposé afin d'améliorer la recherche et l'implantation des compétences en éducation de conseillers.

In 1976 an extensive review of the use of competencies in counsellor education was undertaken as part of a grant from the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission (Tolsma, Chiko, Marks, Kahn, & Friesen, 1977). Over 2,000 competency statements were collected from the literature, from professionals in the field, and from the analysis of the jobs counsellors performed. A taxonomy was created to categorize the competencies (Tolsma, Kahn, Marks, & Chiko, 1979) and a model was developed to write competency statements in a standard format (Chiko, Tolsma, Kahn, & Marks, 1980). From this work, several concerns about the use of competencies in counsellor education have emerged. This article addresses two of the concerns: the relative importance of different areas of competence and the use of competencies in counsellor education.

Importance

As stated by Cogan and Noble:

> The identification and consensual validation of a set of counselor competencies is an essential first step in designing an instructional program that will best meet the needs of the counselor-trainee. (1979, p. 124)

Several recent attempts have been made to survey counsellor educators and therapists in order to identify agreement as to the relative importance of the different components of a counsellor's training (Cogan & Noble, 1979; Jevne, 1981; Menne, 1975).

The rankings of importance of the competencies by category as determined by the extent of agreement among the respondents in three studies are presented in Table 1.

From an examination of Table 1, there appears to be some degree of consensus across the studies that professional ethics; personal characteristics and self awareness; and listening, communication, and counselling skills are the most important areas of competence for counsellors. However, beyond the top three categories, there is much less agreement. It is difficult to compare these studies since each used different competency statements, wrote them in different forms and grouped them into different categories. In addition the studies surveyed different populations and used different statistical methods of analysis to establish their rankings.

The three studies in Table 1 assess professionals' opinions of the importance of competencies in counsellor education and practice. Another *method* to determine the relative importance of competency statements is *to* count their frequency in the literature. An analysis of the 2,186 competencies collected in the Canada Employment

Table 1

Comparison of Rankings of Competency Categories

Menne (1975)	*Jevne (1981)*	*Cogan & Noble (1979)*
Professional ethics	Self awareness	Ethical standards
Self awareness	Personal characteristics	Personal characteristics
Personal characteristics	Counsellor skills and techniques	Communication
Listening, communicating	Theoretical background	Adjunctive activities
Testing skills	Professional/ethical conduct	Counselling skills
Counselling comprehension	Counselling and coordinating	Philosophical foundation
Behavioural science	Measurement techniques	
Societal awareness	Information services	
Tutoring techniques	Evaluation	
Professional credentials	Research abilities	
Counsellor training		
Vocational guidance		

Study (Tolsma et al., 1977) produced yet another set of categories and rankings. The ranking by frequency is presented in Table 2.

The largest number of competency statements have been written to define the skills needed to conduct the counselling interview. There are more than twice as many of these statements than in any other single category. This corresponds to the high ranking of listening, communicating, and counselling skills and techniques from Table 1. Assessment and administrative responsibility are ranked high and reflect the emphasis placed on these activities by professionals in the field. Without this emphasis on assessment and administrative responsibility, personal characteristics is ranked similarly to its position in Table 1. Ethics is not ranked among the top categories because there are relatively very few competency

Table 2

Frequency of Competency Statements by Category

Categories	Number of Competencies	Percent of Total
Counselling practice	619	28.32
Assessment	303	13.86
Administrative responsibility	249	11.39
Personal characteristics	117	8.10
Evaluation/research	160	7.32
Consultation	146	6.68
Referral	113	5.17
Placement	80	3.66
Labor market	64	2.93
Ethics	58	2.65
Planning and development	57	2.61
Career development	52	2.38
Staff relations	50	2.29
Special populations	39	1.78
Follow-up	19	0.86
Total	2,186	100.00

statements written on ethics. One reason for the high ranking of ethics in Table 1 could be that participants were asked to respond to a small number of items on ethics. Although counsellor educators and professionals talk a great deal about the importance of ethics, this emphasis is not reflected in the number of existing competency statements devoted to this category as can be seen in Table 2.

In comparing these four studies, it is apparent that there is some agreement that personal characteristics, self awareness and counselling skills, including listening and communication, are considered to be the most important competencies for a counsellor to demonstrate. Unfortunately there has been little agreement as to how competency statements should be categorized. Therefore it is difficult to get cross validation from one study to another. For the three studies listed in Table 1, different respondent samples were used. For example, Menne surveyed psychiatrists, social workers, education counsellors, and psychologists; Jevne surveyed counsellor educators, counsellor supervisors, practicing counsellors, and counselling students; and Cogan and Noble surveyed counsellor educators involved in practicum supervision. A final difficulty in interpreting the findings from these types of survey measures is that the competencies often are written by counsellor educators and do not necessarily describe the actual job tasks of the practicing counsellor.

Use

Counsellor training by competencies has gained increasing popularity. Some of the advantages associated with this trend are to define clearly the counsellor's role (North Texas State, 1973), to assess counsellor performance for purposes of accountability and evaluation (Bruce, Cauley, & O'Mara, 1975; Helwig, 1975), to aid in the selection of counsellors and counselling students

(Fuller, Note 1), and to provide a standard for certification and licensure (Biles, Cash, Griffiths, Heritage, & James, 1977). While there are many potential advantages in specifying counselling behaviour in terms of competencies, the question remains, why is training by competency not more prevalent in counsellor education?

The major disadvantages in using competency training in counsellor education is that this approach requires a great deal of time and resources to establish (Krumboltz, Note 2). This problem is magnified by the fact that educational training structures are often designed in modules or courses which are not easily translatable into competencies (Fuller, 1976). Some counsellor educators could be threatened by the idea of competencies. They believe they will lose their academic freedom to develop their own content and means for training. Counsellor educators also could be threatened by the evaluation component associated with competencies; that is, when it is specifically stated what one's students must do, then an educator's performance is more open to objective evaluation. Similarly, practicing counsellors could be resistant to competencies because they fear the identification of shortcomings in their own performance. The tangible costs and emotional reactions to the use of competencies in counsellor education are two possible reasons why, despite all of the written material about compe-

Table 3

Categories of Competence

Knowledge	*Function*	*Personal Characteristics*
Assessment (measurement & evaluation procedures)	Administrating (planning, organizing, implementing, evaluating & maintaining activities)	Emotional maturity (sincere, aware, stable, etc.)
Consultation (conferring, discussing & recommending)	Counselling (attending, understanding, empathizing, confronting, etc.)	Ethics (honesty, responsibility)
Human behaviour (personality, learning, interpersonal & group dynamics)	Operating (using computers, T.V., & equipment)	Intelligence (creative, exploring, curious, etc.)
Intervention strategies (methods for client change and development)	Researching (defining, formulating, testing & interpreting theories & findings)	Tolerance (flexible, empathic, sensitive, etc.)
Research (rationale, method, technique, & tools of scientific study)	Supervising (stimulating, guiding, directing supervisees)	
Administration (planning, organizing, implementing, evaluating & maintaining activities)	Teaching/training (planning, designing & conducting education)	
Agencies, communities (public & private service groups)	Testing (administration, analyzing & interpreting tests)	
Education, training institutions (schools & programs for job training, apprenticeship & higher education)		
Instruction (teaching methods)		
Labour markets (job requirements, employment conditions, economic trends)		
Legal (laws & regulations)		
Organization structure (procedures & lines of authority in work)		
Programs (opportunities offered by agencies, institutions, civic groups & employers)		
Special groups (needs of veterans, women, handicapped, minorities, age groups, etc.)		
Supervision (directing action of supervisees)		
Technological hardware (equipment such as computers, T.V. & machines)		

tency training, relatively little action has been taken to implement competency training programs.

Another difficulty in using competencies has to do with the competency statements themselves. They tend to be confounded in that they combine knowledge, skill, and personal characteristics; they are written at varying levels of specificity; and they do not necessarily address all the tasks a counsellor performs (Chiko et al., 1980). This confusion in the way competencies have been written contributes to the time and energy necessary for successful implementation.

Recommendations

If further effort is to be directed towards research and implementation of competencies in counsellor education, there must be standardization of both category systems and the way competency statements are written. A model has been developed for these purposes (Chiko et al., 1980).

The category system presented in Table 3 accommodates all the categories listed in Table 1 and Table 2. Future research efforts to determine the relative importance of different areas of competence could be enhanced by using a common category system. The category system in Table 3 is flexible and can be altered to reflect the changing role and responsibilities of counsellors.

The standardization of the writing of competency statements can be achieved using a four part format which identifies: (1) the knowledge or function, (2) what is to be done, (3) how it is to be done, and (4) the sources or recipients of the knowledge or function. The knowledge and function areas have been presented in Table 3. When standardization of category systems and the format of competency statements is accepted by the profession, training by competencies will become more feasible in counsellor education.

References

Biles, L.W., Cash, W.L., Jr., Griffiths, I.A., Heritage, J., & James, S.L. *Committee on competency-based licensure in the academic psychology setting.* Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 1977.

Bruce, T.A., Cauley, W.J., Jr., & O'Mara, R.J., Sr. Accountability: A total commitment. *Journal of Employment Counseling,* 1975, *12,* 41-48.

Chiko, C.H., Tolsma, R.J., Kahn, S.E., & Marks, S.E. A model to systematize competencies in counselor education. *Counselor Education and Supervision,* 1980, *19,* 283-292.

Cogan, D.B., & Noble, F.C. Ratings on a comprehensive set of counselor competencies. *Counselor Education and Supervision,* 1979, *19,* 120-125.

Fuller, E. *A competency based training program for manpower counselors.* Portland, Ore.: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1973.

Jevne, R. Counsellor competencies and selected issues in Canadian counsellor education. *Canadian Counsellor,* 1981, *15,* 00-00.

Menne, J.M. A comprehensive set of counselor competencies. *Journal of Counseling Psychology,* 1975, *22,* 547-553.

North Texas State University, College of Education Guidance and Counseling Staff. *Preparation of guidance associates and professional counselors within the framework of a competency-based program.* Washington, D.C.: American Personnel and Guidance Press, 1973.

Tolsma, R.J., Chiko, C.H., Marks, S.E., & Friesen, J.D. *Canada manpower competency based counsellor training project.* Ottawa, Canada: Canada Employment and Immigration Commission, 1977.

Tolsma, R.J., Kahn, S.E., Marks, S.E., & Chiko, C.H. A model for generating competencies for the employment counselor. *Journal of Employment Counseling,* 1979, *16,* 5-15.

Reference Notes

1. Fuller, E. Personal communication, 1976.
2. Krumboltz, J. Personal communication, 1976.