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COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY: A DISCIPLINE

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Abstract

This article is a beginning step in the process of defining counselling psychology as a discipline. The following areas are examined: (1) the history of the emergence of disciplines, (2) the process fields of study move through in becoming disciplines, (3) the status of counselling psychology in relationship to the criteria of a discipline, and (4) the domain of psychological knowledge included in the discipline of counselling psychology.

In the past fifteen years, we have experienced a rapid growth and expansion of the scope and nature of professional training and practice in counselling psychology. Considerable discussion has occurred attempting to identify the knowledge, skills and competencies required by counselling psychologists. National debate in Canada has been generated to obtain agreement on role concepts and role expectations of counsellors (Wallace, Studd, & Ringwood, 1982). Underlying much of the discussion on training, practice, and role definition is the more basic issue of whether or not

counselling psychology is a *bonafide* discipline, an interdisciplinary area of study, or a unique combination of both.

It is assumed in this article that counselling psychology has entered a unique historical period because it has become a *bonafide* discipline and also has complex interdisciplinary ties. While, as is discussed in the following sections, counselling psychology does not meet all the criteria of a well established discipline, it nevertheless meets many of the necessary criteria.

In addition to being a discipline, counselling psychology has a complex interdisciplinary relationship with better established disciplines such as education, psychiatry,

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sociology and psychology. In this sense, it is no different from other disciplines such as biology, which has interdisciplinary ties with biochemistry, physics, physiology, botany, genetics and nuclear biology, but at the same time has a well defined disciplinary base.

In this article, arguments are presented in support of the thesis that counselling psychology is a discipline. Some of the literature about the emergence of disciplines is examined to indicate: (1) the process that fields move through in becoming disciplines, (2) the criteria for determining when an area of study is a discipline, (3) the degree to which the field of counselling psychology meets the criteria of a discipline, and (4) the domain of psychological knowledge that is included in the discipline of counselling psychology. Hopefully, the discussion will be helpful in clarifying the "identity" of counselling psychology as an important discipline in the mainstream of the human services profession.

Disciplines arise through a process of growth and development (Moore, 1970). They do not emerge fully grown in a short period of time. In the early stages of their history, they consist of a few scholars working in relative obscurity.

Disciplines develop on an uneven front with some areas maturing more rapidly than others. For example, in counselling psychology, vocational counselling has matured much more rapidly than marital and family counselling, which only recently has been identified as an important component in the domain of knowledge and skills held by counsellors (Blocher, 1982). It is fruitless to try to identify a time line or date when a discipline appears. However, it is quite possible to identify a set of historical circumstances or factors which converge and are instrumental in the development of a discipline.

Historically, counselling psychology goes back into the guidance movement at the turn of the century when it was strongly associated with the social reform movement (Blocher, 1982). That movement merged over time with concepts drawn from vocational psychology, developmental psychology, psychology of individual differences, social psychology and the theory of influence, growth and change to develop a professional field of study, research, and practice.

It has taken counselling psychology close to 100 years to develop and to be recognized

as a discipline. Other disciplines have had a similar history. For example, Timasheff and Theodorson (1976) point out that although sociology was introduced in 1839, it was accepted into the academic community only after considerable struggle and, although it has been established on the North American continent, sociology has still not been recognized as a separate discipline in England.

Criteria for identifying a discipline

Previous analysis of the literature dealing with the emergence of disciplines has identified seven criteria which are useful in determining if a discipline exists. These include: (1) a unique subject matter, (2) an adequate body of theory and research, (3) a unique methodology, (4) a community of scholars, (5) supporting organizations, journals and services, (6) utility, and (7) a belief that it exists. I will elaborate on these criteria and apply them to counselling psychology.

A Distinct Subject Matter

The most traditional criterion for identifying a discipline and the most easy to apply, is a unique subject matter (Van Lear, 1962), or when there is a body of new information and insights (Phillips, 1973). In this regard, counselling psychology is an area of professional activity and knowledge distinct from other disciplines. It has been defined as a specialty whose practitioners help people improve their psychological well-being, resolve their crises, and increase their ability to solve problems and make decisions (Lecomte, Dumont, & Zingle, 1981).

The focus of the subject matter in counselling psychology is on the interaction of personal and environmental forces in the natural contexts of school, family and workplace. The counsellor is expected to understand and intervene constructively in interaction. Both human development and pathology are understood within this framework. This viewpoint was first enunciated by Williamson who was the first president of Division 17 of the American Psychological Association. It has since been more fully developed in the counselling literature by such writers as Wrenn (1962), Shoben (1962), Kelly (1966), Berdie (1972), Lecomte, Dumont and Zingle (1981), and Blocher (1982).

The subject matter of counselling psychology prepares counsellors to work in educational and vocational or manpower develop-

Counselling Psychology

ment settings as well as agencies, government, and private practice helping people deal with the practical problems of daily living. This is in sharp contrast to clinical psychologists and psychiatrists who work with severely disturbed and institutionalized patients. As Lecomte, Dumont and Zingle (1981) point out, the counselling psychologist essentially uses a learning model of growth and change in which problems-in-living are viewed less as illnesses or symptoms of illnesses than as emotional, cognitive and behavioral problems.

move in an articulate and forthright way to define itself in terms of the ideas, commitments and competencies that are part of its heritage and thereby clarify its role, contributions, and subject matter.

2 An adequate Body of Theory and Research

Counselling psychology is interwoven with a number of disciplines as is illustrated in Figure 1. Each of the identified areas of study contributes to the field of counselling psychology. Nevertheless, each discipline has its own focus, assumptions, theories, practice, and research activity. Similarly, counselling psychology, while it has received contributions from a variety of disciplines, is in the process of developing its own body of theory, practice, and research.

Counselling psychology as a discipline must continue to move forward with research and models of theory and practice that are developmentally oriented and focus on the interaction of the individual and the environment. In support of this view, Blocher (1982) points out that counselling psychology must

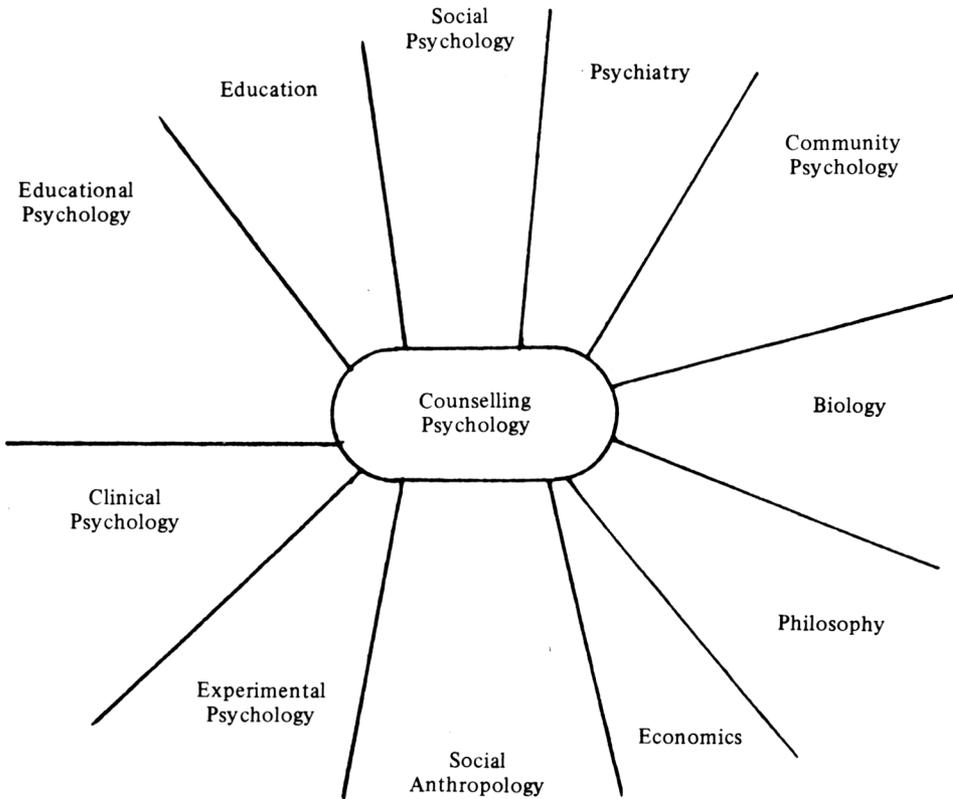


Figure 1. The relationship between counselling psychology and other Disciplines

As a discipline, counselling psychology draws upon and contributes to psychological theory and research in a number of areas. Blocher (1982) has identified five areas of research and theory that are central to counselling psychology. These include the following domains:

- ① Vocational behavior, including the development of vocational interests, attitudes, values and aptitudes and their relationship to vocational satisfaction and effectiveness;
- ② Human cognition and cognitive development and their relationship to problem-solving, decision-making and judgement;
- ③ Human learning and behavior change particularly in their relationship to the acquisition, transfer and maintenance of coping and mastery behaviors through the life span;
- ④ Human communication and interpersonal behavior, especially within family and other primary group settings that influence developmental processes;
- ⑤ The nature of optimal person-environment fit especially in family, education, work and other community settings as these impinge upon the health, happiness and continuing growth of members.

While not all counselling psychologists would agree that the five domains of theory and research identified above form the basic content of counselling psychology, they nevertheless establish a good beginning definition.

Somewhat related to the above domain of theory and knowledge, Lecomte, Dumont and Zingle (1981) have proposed domains of responsibility of counselling psychologists. The objectives of these domains are the following:

- ① Helping individuals negotiate the "crises" which appear in successive life phases;
- ② Altering maladaptive behaviors;
- ③ Preventing problems and conduct disorders in individuals at risk.

As is evident from the previous discussion, counselling psychology uses the science of human behavior to assist people in individual, small group and family counselling contexts to deal with a variety of life concerns. Some of these concerns are personal problem-solving and decision-making, educational and vocational planning, family problems, interpersonal issues and other matters relating to personal growth and human effectiveness.

In addition to addressing concerns regarding the problems of individuals and

groups, counselling psychology also has developed models of consultation with individuals, organizations and institutions to help foster healthy and growthful environments for those who work and study in them.

Counselling psychology also has a commitment to the development of psychological education and training people in interpersonal and life skills. Such training may take place in school, community, business, hospital, church and other settings and is designed to help people improve their interpersonal relationships and effectiveness.

The body of research in counselling psychology consists of basic and applied research in the areas of (1) counselling process and outcomes, (2) tests and assessment techniques, (3) models of personal and social change, (4) person-environment interaction and ecological models and (5) career education and decision-making (Pepinsky, 1978).

It is not the purpose of this article to review the body of research in counselling psychology since this has already been done in the *Annual Review of Psychology* (Krumholtz, Becker-Haven, & Burnett, 1979), but to point out that scholars located in universities and community settings are grounded in the counselling psychology field and are creating new knowledge through their theorizing and research. Counselling psychology is moving forward with research that is based on well defined concepts and competencies and that relate to professional commitment and role.

3 A Unique Methodology

Moore (1970) points out that as a discipline matures it begins to emphasize selected methodologies. However, the development of a unique methodology does not seem to be a critical a factor because disciplines tend to share methodologies. As Bronowski (1973) suggests, most modern social sciences have very similar methodologies drawn from the natural sciences, such as agriculture and biomedicine.

Regardless of their origin and uniqueness, methodological understandings are essential in the development of counselling psychology as a discipline. This view is supported by Brown and Kidwell (1982) in their assertion that the success or failure of any discipline rests ultimately upon the relative strength of its methodology. They contend that without a

Counselling Psychology

well developed methodology, there can be no maturation of the field but only unchecked expansion. Without the necessary knowledge and skills to validate conceptualizations and make judgements, there is no rational basis for the rejection of ideas and/or practice resulting in the equal acceptability of every concept, theory and working hypothesis. Kerlinger (1979) expresses this point succinctly with his comment that empirical evidence checks our frequently unbridled addiction to make broad assertions about the world.

Methodology as understood here encompasses not only the dictums of good research, but also the ability to make judgements relative to the value and consequence of identifiable sets of data. This ability is particularly important in counselling psychology and in the social sciences generally because of the tendency toward unchecked expansion and proliferation of psychological theories and concepts. Theories tend to be adopted and promoted without adequate empirical investigation and support.

As counselling psychology develops as a discipline, it is in need of more than data collection, data analysis and the ability to apply judgement. It also has a strong need for conceptual refinement and formulation of theory. This latter type of methodological enquiry is based on the philosophy of science perspective (Popper, 1965) which establishes a relationship between ideas and data. In contrast to the traditional view of research methodology, this viewpoint attempts to bridge gaps between theory and data by systematically stating abstract ideas and linking them to data. While this methodology does not replace earlier methods of research, it provides a meaningful alternative to the positivist position which conceives of methodology as the process of building ideas and then trying to conjure up data to support the ideas. Too often the positivist scientific process tends to be designed to substantiate a pattern of thought rather than systematically establishing linkages between theory and data (Bhaskar, 1980).

In the preceding discussion, it has been argued that effective methodology involves data collection, data analysis, applying judgement and systematically linking ideas with data and thus generating laws of human behavior. To more effectively conduct this enterprise, counselling psychology researchers will need to become more aware of recent developments occurring in the related social

science fields. New insights and research techniques will need to be drawn from fields such as economics, statistics, survey research and philosophy of science. Furthermore, researchers in counselling psychology will need to more adequately address (a) the fit between the theoretical and empirical models in research and, (b) the role of the researcher's values in designing, conducting and analyzing research data.

a) Fit Between Methods and Theories

Counselling psychology has in the last few years made some progress in developing and formalizing theoretical statements. Many of the theoretical formulations are beginning to use multivariate models created by combining bivariate relationships from past research. A research issue inherent in theory testing is that of the problem of fit, that is by the time the researcher has moved to the level of the model, he/she must struggle with the issue of isomorphism. The overriding question is: Does the theoretical model perform the same way empirical reality performs? In the same way that bivariate models do not adequately test the theoretical model, neither will multiple regression models suffice.

b) Role of Values in Research

Counselling psychology has, from its inception, been concerned with the role of values in the counselling process. However, there has been little discussion about the role of values relative to research. Two main concerns relate to research and values. The first concern which is presently receiving considerable attention from "Human Subjects Committees" is the establishment of a code of ethics for researchers. The protection of the rights and welfare of the research subjects must be adequately balanced against the need to produce useful knowledge. The second concern involves the assumption that good research is characterized by a value free stance on the part of the investigator. Very little literature in counselling psychology addresses the consequences of accepting the value-free position of the traditional positivism. Nevertheless, instead of being value-free, research in the positivist tradition may be value laden. Traditional positivism, by attempting to separate "what is" from "what should be" is seen by some as operating from a set of conservative ethics in defense of the status quo (Baumrind, 1980).

It could be argued that social science and

political issues are inevitably related (Dobash & Dobash, 1981). The attempt to separate counselling psychology research from the process of social action is not only undesirable, but also essentially impossible. [Research in counselling psychology should describe not only "what is" but also attempt to do so within a framework of clarifying and justifying "what ought to be."]

In summary, considerable discussion needs to be undertaken to resolve the issues in counselling psychology research. A number of philosophical and methodological issues will need to be confronted. Considerable efforts will need to be devoted to measuring psychological constructs, and concerns persist about the adequacy of connections between empirical indicators and theoretical constructs. Finally, counselling psychology researchers have a diversity of methods and designs to draw from, such as correlational, quasi-experimental, experimental, ethnographic, participant observation, cross-cultural, and in depth studies. [Clearly, counselling psychology will need to wrestle with the development of methods and designs which best fit the theoretical and practical issues involved.]

4 A Community of Scholars

A fourth criterion of a discipline is the capacity of the field to teach its subject matter in a disciplined and rigorous manner (Blume, 1974; Moore, 1970). Inadequacy in this area would mean that students would have to be taught in another discipline to become adequate scholars. This is not the case in counselling psychology because counselling departments have been preparing scholars at the masters and doctoral levels during the last 20 or more years. These scholars have been generating theory and research. They are relatively well grounded in counselling psychology and are moving in an articulate way to define themselves in terms of their ideas, commitments, and competencies.

5 Supporting Organizations, Journals, and Services

A discipline needs a variety of supporting services to exist (Parsons, 1969). It needs journals, professional associations, meetings where scholarly papers are presented, critiques, academic departments, courses of study, academic requirements, etc. [These services provide the opportunity for professional growth, interaction, and exchange so that the discipline can continue to develop.]

Counselling psychology has both national and international professional associations. In Canada, the Canadian Guidance and Counselling Association and the Canadian Psychological Association represent the professional interests of counselling psychology. In the United States, the American Personnel and Guidance Association and Division 17 of the American Psychological Association, address issues relating to counselling psychology. Internationally, associations such as the International Roundtable for the Advancement of Counselling and the International Vocational Guidance Association, speak to the international concerns of counselling psychology. At least ten different refereed professional journals are published by counselling psychology associations around the world. In addition, numerous related psychological and educational journals publish articles in the field of counselling. Such journals as *The Counseling Psychologist*, *Family Relations*, *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *American Psychologist*, *Journal of School Psychology*, and the *Canadian Journal of Education*, welcome the opportunity to publish counselling psychology articles. Almost every major university offers courses at the graduate level in counselling. Many of these programmes offer masters and doctoral degrees. [As is evident from the above analysis, the field of counselling psychology has developed a large network of academic services, journals, and associations to support professional growth and development.]

6 Utility

A field is not a *bonafide* discipline if it does not have some apparent utility (Blume, 1974; Phillips, 1973). The utility of the counselling psychology field is readily apparent. From its early history, counselling psychology has addressed itself to practitioners, educators, and political leaders with the intent of helping people improve their psychological well-being, resolve crises, and increase their ability to solve problems and make decisions.

Counselling psychologists are actively involved in helping individuals, groups, and families to learn the skills which are necessary to understand, evaluate, and successfully manage the environmental forces which influence their development. Counsellors work with schools, hospitals, businesses, governments, and teaching staffs and classes of students. In counselling with individuals and families, the developmental stages, life tasks and cultural background are important consid-

erations in the development of interventions.

As is evident from the above discussion, counselling psychology has wide utility. The theory and research has by and large grown out of clinical and institutional activities and has been formulated by professionals who have worked in a variety of work settings.

Conclusions

The conclusion from this analysis is that counselling psychology meets some of the criteria which identify a discipline, and like any relatively new discipline, it meets some of them more adequately than others. It is relatively mature in terms of a body of theory, research and practice which has been generated over a period of over one hundred years. It also has its own journals, professional associations, academic courses and university programmes of study to effectively discipline the students who are planning to become scholars in the field.

7 A Belief That it Exists

Finally, a discipline only exists if professionals in the academic community agree that an area of investigation has achieved the status of a discipline (Blume, 1974; Parsons, 1969). A field cannot be a discipline if no one accepts it as such. Nevertheless, there may be situations in which the only reason that an area of enquiry is not viewed as a discipline is because the definitions have not yet become widely shared.

Counselling psychologists working in universities have only recently attempted to define their area of study as a discipline. In the past, the professional identity of counselling psychologists was relatively unclear. This problem is aggravated by the fact that in some universities, counselling is taught in Departments of Educational Psychology, in others in Departments of Psychology, and in still others in Departments of Counsellor Education or in Faculties of Education. In Canada, only one university has a Department of Counselling Psychology, while in the United States more than twenty Departments of Counselling Psychology have been established. These are attached either to the Faculty of Education or the Department of Psychology.

The varying organizational patterns within the university community create a serious identity problem for counselling psychology. University colleagues have a difficult time understanding the teaching and research models of counselling psychologists unless these are clearly identified and articulated. Furthermore, unless specific Departments of Counselling Psychology are established at universities, students and staff do not fully appreciate the disciplinary base of counselling psychology. If the counselling field is to be viewed in the same manner that Economics, English and Chemistry are viewed, it will be necessary to clearly establish our identity. We will need to address fully the department organizational issues at the university as well as clearly articulate our theory and research models.

The criteria that counselling psychology does not meet adequately are those pertaining to an effective research methodology and a belief that it exists. Counselling psychology has borrowed its methodology from other disciplines, particularly from the natural sciences. There is a need for scholars in the field of counselling psychology to develop innovative methodological procedures that address the questions of data collection, data analysis and making empirically based judgements on ideas. There is a strong need for conceptual refinement and formulation of theory. Counselling psychology will need to make progress in establishing fit between methods and theories and to more fully articulate the role of values in research.

Finally, counselling psychologists will need to articulate more explicitly their theory and research models. They will need to reply to the sceptics within and outside the field of counselling that there is a counselling psychology discipline. Furthermore, Departments of Counselling Psychology will need to be established within the university. This may mean giving up old alliances and organizational structures and building new frameworks and bridges. While this may appear risky, especially during a time of economic restraint, it is a necessary step in defining counselling psychology as a discipline. Nevertheless, despite these inadequacies and problems, given the robust quality of counsellors and the growing need for their services, the collective future of counselling psychology looks sanguine.

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