
Teaching Counselling Theory and Skills: A Scoping Review of Canadian Graduate Counselling Psychology Coursework

Enseignement théorique et technique du counseling : revue de la portée des cours universitaires canadiens de maîtrise en psychologie du counseling

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ABSTRACT

This article describes a scoping review and content analysis of Canadian counselling and counselling psychology graduate coursework focused on counselling and psychotherapy preparation. The authors explored the coursework of 24 graduate-level master's programs and received relevant syllabi from 11 of these programs. Through a content analysis framework, multiple themes were identified, including areas such as course description, objectives, structures, expectations, readings, and evaluations/assignments. Implications for teaching and training are discussed along with considerations for future research.

RÉSUMÉ

Le présent article décrit une étude de la portée et une analyse du contenu des cours universitaires canadiens de deuxième cycle en counseling et en psychologie du counseling, l'accent étant mis sur la préparation au counseling et à la psychothérapie. Les auteurs ont examiné les cours constituant 24 programmes universitaires de maîtrise et ont reçu des plans de cours pertinents de la part des responsables de 11 de ces programmes. Dans le cadre d'une analyse de contenu, on a défini plusieurs thématiques, notamment la description de cours, les objectifs, les structures, les résultats attendus, les listes de lectures, ainsi que les évaluations et travaux. On y discute des implications pour l'enseignement et la formation, ainsi que des aspects à prendre en compte dans les études à venir.

Counselling psychology and counselling are critically important disciplines, each contributing greatly to Canada's population of professional psychologists and counsellors. Many of the country's preparation programs are located in universities at the graduate level, and tend to be within education faculties or departments. Graduates of these programs may have the option to seek certification as Certified Canadian Counsellors with the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association (CCPA) and /or become Registered or Licensed Psychologists with their provincial/territorial psychology boards/colleges. Even though there are guidelines on practitioner competency expectations and there is a high degree of consistency in where such programs are located, we know relatively little about how courses

in counselling and counselling psychology are actually structured at the university level. Very few publications exist in this area. This project was developed to explore introductory graduate-level counselling theory and skills courses in counselling and counselling psychology master's programs in Canada. This information provides a partial picture of how courses designed to teach counselling theory and skills are structured in Canada.

Research on Counsellor Training

Various training programs (e.g., Carkhuff, 1969; Cohen, 2004; Cormier, Nurius, & Osborn, 2012; Hill, Stahl, & Roffman, 2007; Ivey, 1971; Kagan, 1984; Urbani, Smith, Maddux, & Crews, 2002) have been developed for instruction in microskills and basic counselling skills. Such training is often at the prepracticum or preinternship level and occurs at the earlier stages of counsellor preparation. Early research has supported elements of skills training approaches (see Hill & Lent, 2006, for reviews), but researchers have noted some methodological issues with research design in this area of research (e.g., Evans, 2011; Hill & Lent, 2006). Evans (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 33 published studies on counselling skill training. This research found a small effect size and noted that the type of skills curricula had no impact on outcome for master's-level counsellor trainees. They also found that trainees who practiced skills with volunteer clients demonstrated greater improvement in skills versus trainees who role-played with other trainees. Some researchers have suggested that specific counsellor training models (e.g., skilled counsellor training model) can result in greater gains by trainees in skill development and even counselling self-efficacy compared to those not receiving such preparation (Urbani et al., 2002). Regardless of curricula approach, Carkhuff (1987) noted that core microskills (e.g., attending, facilitating) are critical and serve as the foundation for more advanced skills. Many counselling preparation programs include didactic instruction on counselling and communication microskills and have opportunities for students to practice such skills under supervision (Trepal, Haberstroh, Duffey, & Evans, 2007). Related to skills training, Keats (2009) highlighted several advantages of using video demonstrations in counsellor preparation and discussed several key considerations in utilizing such video demonstrations in teaching counselling (e.g., video selection, student preparation to view the video) (see Keats, 2009, for a review).

Research (e.g., Heppner & Claiborn, 1989; Heppner & Dixon, 1981) has suggested that key counsellor skills and abilities can be enhanced by training. There has been a range of studies and opinions put forward regarding what are important skills and personal characteristics/attributes for counsellors and psychotherapists. Authors (e.g., Bedi et al., 2011; Trepal et al., 2007) have noted that understanding and being able to develop a therapeutic or working relationship is a core condition of counselling. Indeed, Carl Rogers (1957) talked about the core conditions of counselling, whereby a counsellor should be able to provide accurate empathy, unconditional positive regard, and genuine-

ness. Researchers have highlighted the personal characteristics of the counsellor (e.g., nonjudgemental, accepting, warm, caring) as being critical and noted that counsellors in training must be capable and willing to be self-reflective and nondefensive (Grencavage & Norcross, 1990). Wheeler (2000) explored characteristics of good and bad counselling students, noting several categories such as trainees being open or closed, personable or aloof, secure or insecure, and professionally skilled or unskilled. Researchers have highlighted core characteristics for counsellor development such as counsellor conceptual level, ego development, and counselling self-efficacy (Beutler, Machado, & Neufeldt, 1994; Urbani et al., 2002). Arthur and Januszkowski (2001) have highlighted a range of multicultural competencies as being critical to Canadian counsellors. Other researchers have put forward common-factor models that suggest potential core considerations for training programs (e.g., see Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 2003, for reviews). Many proponents highlight theory as being core to counsellor preparation, including theoretical eclecticism and integration (Corey, 2012; Truscott, 2009). Research training (e.g., scientist practitioner) has also become a core consideration in counsellor training (Bedi et al., 2011).

Certification and Registration

There have also been shifts in certification and registration in the areas of counselling and counselling psychology. The Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association has set requirements for applicants wishing to be Certified Canadian Counsellors, including required graduate courses in (a) counselling theories and (b) counselling and communication skills (CCPA, 2014). Some students from counselling psychology programs also pursue Psychology Registration. Registration requires completion of a graduate degree in psychology (some jurisdictions allow for registration at the master's level) with appropriate coursework completed. As an example, the Newfoundland and Labrador Psychology Board (n.d.) requires two graduate-level courses in intervention as part of their requirements.

The Current Study

As seen, research supports various skill training approaches as well as individual training components when it comes to counsellor skill training. There appear to be multiple viewpoints on how counselling skills can be taught and, similarly, on which skill areas should be targeted to produce effective counsellors. It is also clear that different regulatory bodies have expectations regarding the “how” and “what” of effective counsellor training. What is also clear from this review is that we know very little about how counselling skills are actually taught in Canadian counselling graduate programs. In this study we have attempted to systematically examine the actual design, content, and approach of graduate-level counselling coursework focused on counselling training. In this way, we offer a snapshot of how such training is actually happening in Canada.

METHODS

Scoping Methodology, Study Purpose, Procedures, and Data Sample

Scoping reviews have been defined in multiple ways (e.g., see Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Gough, Oliver, & Thomas, 2012, for reviews). The current study utilized a scoping methodology, which systematically explores a specific body of data based on explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria. The goal of this review was to conduct a preliminary investigation of the data within a specific study topic, which is consistent with a scoping review model (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Gough et al., 2012). To complete this review, we used the scoping methodology provided by Arksey and O'Malley (2005). This approach consists of several stages: (a) determining the guiding focus or question, (b) identifying relevant documents, (c) selecting the relevant documents for inclusion, (d) charting and recording various pieces of information from the documents, and (e) summarizing and reporting the findings (see Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

The purpose of this project was to obtain information about counselling courses taught at the master's level in Canadian universities. The focus was on courses that prepare students in counselling or psychotherapy and are part of counselling or counselling psychology master's programs. These programs tend to be in education departments or faculties. The authors utilized provincial lists of universities and examined each university website to identify relevant counselling and counselling psychology programs. Through this review of master's-level counselling and counselling psychology programs in Canada, the authors identified 24 programs that were relevant to the current study. These programs were French or English, were at the master's level, and aimed to prepare, at least in part, practitioners with expertise in counselling.

Within each program, required and elective courses that focused on counselling or psychotherapy preparation were identified through an examination of university websites and calendars. An initial reviewer examined all program course descriptions for these 24 programs. Any course that mentioned counselling (e.g., interventions, theory, skills, specific population, cultural competency, practicum/internship) was included. A second reviewer conducted the same search/review of course descriptions to help ensure as complete a list of relevant courses as possible.

University ethics approval was subsequently obtained from Memorial University. As part of the ethics process, each of the 24 universities under investigation was contacted to request permission to seek out the identified relevant course syllabi. Many of the universities required an application to their ethics committees. Following all required permissions, university administrators were sent an e-mail script asking them to forward the request for specific course syllabi to the appropriate faculty members. The e-mail script also asked for any additional courses that the faculty members deemed as being relevant to the study purpose. After roughly one month, administrators were sent a follow-up e-mail. Of the 24 universities contacted, 12 provided syllabi. In total, 47 course syllabi were received. Any syllabi in French were translated at this stage.

Analysis

Analysis followed from Patton's (2002) qualitative content analysis framework. The goal of the analysis was to identify core thematic dimensions of courses focused on counselling theory and skills. With this in mind, the initial analysis decision involved identifying which course syllabi to exclude from or include in the analysis. As noted, we were interested in exploring initial master's-level coursework focused on counselling theory and core/basic counselling skill development. This proved to be complex due to the variations in how counselling appears to be taught between programs. Some programs cover theory and practice within a course, whereas others seem to divide topics between courses (e.g., theory; skills and communication; interventions). In setting inclusion criteria, we took the approach that courses that explicitly focused on understanding, integrating, or applying counselling theory or that covered core/basic communication and facilitation skills (e.g., microskills) would be included in the analysis. In setting exclusion criteria, we also took the approach that specialized courses focused on unique populations (e.g., addictions) or advanced topics (e.g., planning and delivering interventions) would be excluded from the analysis. We also excluded courses focused primarily on multicultural competencies, as these courses were often in addition to introductory counselling theory and skills-based courses and tended to be completed subsequent to such introductory courses. Each of the course syllabi was reviewed by both authors with the above exclusion/inclusion considerations in mind. After this review, 18 syllabi from 11 different universities remained. These syllabi reflected core counselling courses primarily focused on theory and core/basic counselling skills across 11 master's-level counselling psychology and counselling programs. These programs were located throughout western, central, and Atlantic Canada.

The next step in the analysis involved an inductive process of creating an initial codebook (Patton, 2002). Constructing and populating the codebook described below was also in line with what Arksey and O'Malley (2005) describe as charting the data. Each syllabus was given a unique numerical label and read through; seemingly significant content was flagged for potential inclusion in the codebook. Following this initial review, syllabi were reread and codes were constructed. Codes were drafted using Microsoft Word. Major ideas and concepts from each syllabi were rewritten in the Word document as individual codes. An example of an individual code is *theories of counselling psychology*. Overlap of codes were not recorded at this stage (i.e., we only continued to include new codes as they emerged). The next step in the analysis was a deductive approach whereby a second reviewer read through each syllabus and transferred all relevant text to the appropriate code(s). Syllabi content was recorded in the Word document introduced above. Redundancy of syllabi content was recorded during this stage, and all content was identified in the document by the unique syllabi numerical label. Any syllabi text not coded was flagged for review and potential expansion of the codebook. This iterative approach allowed for flexibility and expansion of the codes throughout the code development process. The final step in the analysis involved a review of

the existing codebook, including the supporting content from each syllabus. Codes were retained if they were supported by the deductive analysis described above, and remaining codes were organized into themes based on their best fit with the data from the syllabi. An example of a theme is *course description*.

RESULTS

As described above, we conducted a scoping review and content analysis of Canadian counselling and counselling psychology graduate-level courses focused on counselling theories and/or foundational microskills. The following represents our findings based on this analysis. The italicized subsection headings represent our themes, and numbered entries below each subheading represent the codes for that theme. Text in quotes is taken directly from syllabi. Such quotes are provided where we felt the code required further clarification, context, or detail. Having said that, only limited quotes are included to protect anonymity.

Course Description

The majority of course syllabi reviewed included a general description of the course. Some syllabi also included a description of how the course fit into the larger program. The following 19 items represent the codes for our course description theme:

1. Major theories of counselling psychology
2. Historical consideration of the theories
3. Conceptualization of the theories from three (or four) major schools/forces (e.g., psychoanalytic, behavioural, humanistic)
4. Ordering of importance of the theories for the course (e.g., “primary emphasis” and “secondary emphasis”)
5. Brief psychotherapy/counselling approaches
6. Theory as guide for practice/how practice and skills can emerge from theory (e.g., role of theory in practice)
7. Specific aspects that will be covered within each theory including guiding principles, therapeutic process, therapeutic relationship, goals of counselling, application of the therapeutic process to various counselling settings, focus on personality/human nature (human development), change processes (how do people change), limitations of approach, and major contributions of approach
8. Counselling process (e.g., understanding what process means in the context of counselling, including an examination of people’s “change processes”)
9. Reference to geographical relevance of theories (e.g., North American)
10. What counselling and/or counselling psychology (i.e., from a discipline perspective) consists of (e.g., values, definition) in a Canadian context
11. Scientist-practitioner model
12. Positive psychology (e.g., empowerment)

13. Basic skills associated with counselling/psychotherapy (e.g., microskills, communication styles); learning about and purposefully/flexibly practicing such skills
14. Stages of counselling/psychotherapy (e.g., intake, interviewing, assessment, relationship building, goals, working/intervening, evaluation/progress measurement, termination)
15. Understanding and building the therapeutic relationship/working relationship/alliance (e.g., skills to develop relationship); repairing ruptured relationships
16. Role of the professional counsellor
17. Use of language in counselling and its impacts
18. Self as counsellor (e.g., interpersonal/relational; how you are as a person and how that impacts the counselling and the client); self-awareness
19. Integration/integrated counselling model (e.g., theoretical, common factors)

Course Objectives

Syllabi mentioned a number of course objectives. At times these were included in a section identified as “objectives,” but were also noted throughout syllabi in various sections.

1. Students develop and articulate a beginning theory of personal counselling/specialized knowledge of their own theoretical approach to counselling/integration of theories into a counselling orientation for the student
2. Perceive how theory influences and guides counselling practice
3. Gain exposure to a variety of historical and current counselling and psychotherapy theories
4. Critical thinking: critically appraise and consider the theories; understand overlap and differences between theories; consider assumptions within theoretical approaches; consider what the theory contributes and its limitations
5. Consider contemporary issues in counselling that relate to major theories (e.g., application to populations, efficacy of approach)
6. Understand research/evidence (e.g., quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods) in counselling or psychotherapy and how it informs practice; research evidence for specific theoretical approaches
7. Gain awareness and consider your personal experiences, education, and history and how they inform/impact your theory/future practice (e.g., reflective practice)
8. Learn about ethics as applied to counselling
9. Consider multiculturalism and diversity as applied to counselling
10. Master/develop counselling skills (e.g., listening, attending); build a level of competency that prepares the student for supervised or actual practice
11. Prepare students to understand and value supervision and training considerations (e.g., give and receive constructive feedback)
12. Contribute to certification and accreditation requirements (e.g., fulfill a requirement for certification or accreditation)

Course Requirements and Expectations

Course syllabi tended to include various points on expectations and requirements for students. Sometimes these were in a specific section for this purpose and at other times were noted throughout the syllabi. Some syllabi did not make explicit mention of these expectations.

1. Attendance (e.g., “attendance is compulsory”; if a class is missed there must be compensation for the missed learning; students missing a specified number of classes will have to redo the course)
2. Punctuality (e.g., “punctuality is expected”)
3. Professionalism (e.g., act as you would in any “professional setting”)
4. Course readings (e.g., readings must be completed prior to class)
5. Engagement/participation (e.g., participate in class discussions; show knowledge and learning through discussions and/or presentations; willingness to engage in group work)
6. Self-disclosure and confidentiality (e.g., expected to maintain confidentiality with shared personal information)
7. Statement on general expectations around trust, respect, and other core classroom expectations (e.g., all students contribute to the learning environment)

Course and Class Structure

The syllabi also noted various ways in which individual classes would be structured or delivered. Sometimes syllabi offered an overall description on how the course and/or each individual class would be structured or delivered (e.g., first half of the course versus second half of the course; first hour of each class versus last part of each class). Many of the syllabi also offered a course schedule, which included a description of each of the classes’ planned activities and topics. The following is a breakdown of the core structures and delivery mechanisms noted in the syllabi.

1. Use of videos in class
2. Live demonstrations in class
3. Role plays in class (e.g., guided practice)
4. Lecture
5. Seminar course
6. Class discussions
7. Debates
8. Group work in class (e.g., small group skill practice, small group discussions)
9. Online course components (e.g., discussion, readings)
10. Reviewing recordings, transcribing, and commenting on student skill practice

Course Readings

Syllabi reported a range of required and optional texts and readings. The most common approach required textbooks focused on theory and/or skills. Optional

readings also included textbooks. Some syllabi included required and optional readings in the form of published peer-reviewed articles, but this was less common. Specific examples of readings are not included here to protect anonymity.

Course Assignments

Syllabi included multiple course assignments:

1. Brief papers that have a goal of applying something learned from the course to clinical practice
2. Brief assignment focused on research-informed practice
3. Summary papers (e.g., summarize a reading or chapter, summarize a group discussion, summarize a lecture/presentation)
4. Discussion or presentation on a reading
5. Book review
6. Test/exam targeting theory knowledge and other course material
7. Group presentation
8. Individual presentation
9. Practice counselling (e.g., video, skills coding)
10. Group practice of counselling
11. Peer feedback
12. Theory paper (e.g., personal theory of counselling; eclectic approach)
13. Short reflection-based papers or journals/journaling (e.g., record your personal reactions to readings; process course materials)
14. Paper/assignment to help see others' perspectives (e.g., diversity/multicultural focus)

Syllabi also noted other core assignment considerations, which are described below.

15. Assignment format expectations (e.g., APA, length, font size) and grading schemes (e.g., rubrics)
16. Grading considerations beyond letter or numerical grades (e.g., pass/fail course; must pass specific assignments to pass course)

DISCUSSION

Canadian counsellor and counselling psychologist preparation has major implications for the health and well-being of all Canadians. This project has highlighted various characteristics, approaches, and areas of content associated with counselling theory and skill training in Canadian counselling and counselling psychology graduate programs. As described above, such course syllabi demonstrate a range of training implications, approaches, and evaluation structures. The following discussion highlights several key considerations flagged by the current authors as being important for further consideration.

Course Focus and Objectives

Clearly, courses in counselling theory and skill development include a significant amount of content and high expectations for skill development. Syllabi suggested that such courses tend to present a range of theoretical approaches while allowing students the opportunity to specialize or choose certain theories to study in more depth. Some courses tended to emphasize certain theories, but even these courses still typically built in focus on a range of theories. Several authors (e.g., Cheston, 2000; Kelly, 1997) note that presenting a range of theoretical approaches to facilitate an integrative and eclectic counselling orientation is a common trend in counselling. Some authors (e.g., Cheston, 2000) have offered unique approaches to help students manage and integrate the vast amount of information associated with the various counselling theories. Several syllabi emphasized the explicit link between theory and practice and linked specific skills to specific theories. As well, syllabi often presented a range of microskills to be learned, but often did not focus on skill development programs that have been empirically supported *per se*. Research-informed practice was also emphasized in some syllabi (e.g., through discussions of empirical research, through course assignments). This is certainly consistent with a scientist practitioner approach to practice that is central to counselling psychology (Bedi et al., 2011). Research-informed practice may also be covered in other courses not reviewed as part of this project.

Several syllabi described the context of the discipline and the history of the discipline as being important to the course. Several key documents exist that highlight context, history, and definitions for counselling psychology from a Canadian perspective (e.g., Bedi et al., 2011). Several syllabi also highlighted a critical examination of the theories, at times from an international perspective. Many of the counselling theories reviewed in these courses tended to be Western in origin (Corey, 2012); thus, having a diversity lens in the review or critique of these theories was critical.

Course Expectations

Becoming a professional counsellor requires a high degree of maturity and professionalism. There are high expectations for self-reflection and, at times, self-disclosure. Programs are divided on requirements for personal counselling (Malikiosi-Loizos, 2013), but often learning how to be a counsellor requires students to share, to engage experientially, and to be willing to self-reflect. Indeed, research suggests that such experiences can be critical to counsellor development (Furr & Carroll, 2003). Corey, Corey, Corey, and Callanan (2014) have reported that experiential training components and trainee self-disclosure are highly important aspects of counsellor training. Ensuring a psychologically safe environment where students can take such risks is important. Setting up such an environment requires not only the instructor but also fellow students. Several syllabi explicitly outlined these expectations and provided significant detail on the rationale for why this is important and the consequences of not following such expectations.

Other syllabi provided very little detail on this topic. Future research could explore the impact of such explicit direction on actual classroom behaviour. It would also be interesting to examine wider university policy and how that may impact such expectations (e.g., mandatory attendance).

Course and Class Structure

Syllabi highlighted a range of structures and delivery formats for such courses. For example, combinations of lecture, group discussions, and demonstrations were relatively common. There was a clear emphasis on lectures but also experiential methods in many of the syllabi. Several interesting examples of peer work included video work and group discussion. Syllabi in this project overlapped with positive approaches highlighted in the literature (e.g., Keats, 2009).

Course Evaluation

Syllabi also presented a range of course assignments. A theoretical orientation paper was one of the more common assignments discussed within the syllabi. Such assignments typically required students to integrate different theoretical orientations into their personal counselling approach. Such assignments also typically included a self-reflection component. Counselling practice was also a common assignment for such courses, and this tended to include videotaping and/or role playing. Peer-to-peer feedback was a common dimension of such assignments. We also found various process-oriented assignments (e.g., journalling) that required students to track and reflect on their ongoing learning in the course. Formal tests or exams were less common.

LIMITATIONS

Despite surveying 24 universities, we received syllabi from only 12 universities. It is important to note that only course descriptions and syllabi were reviewed for this project. What actually transpired during class time was not investigated. In addition, we focused on theory and skills and excluded a number of other courses that are counselling-oriented. Counselling preparation does not occur in isolation from other experiences and courses, which is a limitation of this study. Nonetheless, we were interested primarily in introductory courses that were focused on theory and basic skills, which we felt were the most appropriate courses to include. Future research could consider other course areas and further investigation of classroom process.

CONCLUSIONS

Training and education in counselling and psychotherapy are highly important areas of curricula for master's programs in counselling and counselling psychology. Unfortunately, research exploring the actual educational and training practices of professors teaching counselling skills in Canada is very limited. Our goal in this

study was to elucidate such practices through the systematic review of relevant course syllabi. Through a detailed scoping review methodology and content analysis framework, we were able to systematically review Canadian counselling and counselling psychology coursework and highlight several core themes related to such counsellor preparation. This information has provided a detailed mapping of core education and training practices among such courses. Such information is important for faculty responsible for developing and delivering coursework in the areas of counselling theory and skills. It also provides important information to students, researchers, and regulatory bodies.

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