The Responsibility of Canadian Counselling Psychology to Reach Systems, Organizations, and Policy-Makers
La responsabilité de la psychologie du counseling au Canada dans l'établissement de contacts avec les systèmes, les organismes, et les responsables des politiques

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ABSTRACT

Social justice is becoming an increasingly important aspect of counselling psychology in Canada, and more research is needed to understand how to make a difference outside of one-on-one counselling sessions. Twelve individuals (including students, researchers, clinicians, and professors) comprised a working group entitled "The Responsibility of Canadian Counselling Psychology to Reach Systems, Organizations, and Policy-Makers" and discussed the role of counselling psychology in reaching beyond individual change. Discussion generated three main themes: identifying needs, using our unique training, and infiltrating and navigating the system. Future directions for social justice and advocacy in counselling psychology are discussed in relation to systemic change.

RÉSUMÉ

La justice sociale devient un aspect de plus en plus important de la psychologie du counseling au Canada, et il faut davantage de recherche pour bien comprendre de quelle façon intervenir efficacement en dehors des séances de counseling individuelles. Douze personnes (étudiants, chercheurs, cliniciens, et enseignants) ont formé un groupe de travail regroupé sous le thème « La responsabilité de la psychologie du counseling au Canada dans l'établissement de contacts avec les systèmes, les organismes, et les responsables des politiques », afin de discuter du rôle de la psychologie du counseling lorsqu'il s'agit d'aller au-delà du changement individuel. Trois grands thèmes sont ressortis des discussions : la détermination des besoins, le recours à notre formation unique, et savoir s'infiltrer et naviguer dans le système. On y discute de grandes orientations de justice sociale et de promotion et défense des droits pour l'avenir de la psychologie du counseling en lien avec le changement systémique.

Social justice is a predominant feature of the Canadian identity and political landscape (Sinacore & Ginsberg, 2015) and a principal value within the discipline of counselling psychology in Canada. The Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists emphasizes social justice as not only a central value but also an obligation and a responsibility. One of the four main ethical principles of the code states that psychologists have "responsibilities to the societies in which they live or work and to the welfare of all human beings in those societies" (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017, p. 31). The focus of the 2018 Canadian Counselling Psychology Conference was in line with the discipline's emphasis on social justice, as the conference focused on advocacy, an important element of social justice. Specifically, the conference focused on how counselling psychology in Canada can work toward more effective advocacy both for the discipline and for the communities we live and work in over the next decade and beyond.

During the conference, multiple working groups were created so that small groups of people could brainstorm and discuss specific aspects of advocacy and social justice within the profession. In this paper, the findings of the working group entitled "The Responsibility of Canadian Counselling Psychology to Reach Systems, Organizations, and Policy-Makers" will be summarized. Shelly Russell-Mayhew and Sharalyn Jordan were invited to facilitate this group, while Hilary Evans volunteered to be the designated note-taker. The members of the working group represented a range of cultural backgrounds, research and clinical interests, career stages, and experiential backgrounds within the field. Twelve individuals (including students, researchers, clinicians, and professors) from across Canada were a part of the discussion that spanned the course of the conference. Key elements discussed in this working group are presented in three main themes, namely, identifying needs, using our unique training, and infiltrating and navigating the system. These themes were identified through a review of the notes made during the working group and discussions between the authors of this article when debriefing their experiences of the working group.

Identifying Needs

Throughout the working group, a common topic that was discussed was the need for support and training in how to undertake the process of advocating. Students in the working group noted that while they understand cognitively and believe in the importance of social justice, they do not know how to go about engaging in activities related to social justice and advocacy. This question of how to teach and implement social justice has been a consistent challenge for progressive educators, even beyond counselling psychology (Hackman, 2005). Some professors in the group had the idea that in the same way that current programs aim to target learning goals by supervising clinical practica, it is possible that training programs need to create a similar environment to target social justice–oriented learning goals.

The disconnect between the cognitive understanding and practical application was noteworthy, as it seemed as though individuals were clear that they understood that it was a part of their responsibility to reach systems, organizations, and policy-makers, but they did not know how to move their responsibility into action. Students requested mentorship in the area of advocacy not only because they felt they needed more training but also because they needed support. It was a shared conclusion among participants that the process of advocating is often uncomfortable and requires taking risks, which is a difficult task to undertake independently or without support. Advocacy should not be an accidental side effect of the nature of our work but an intentional effort and purposeful activity.

Using Our Unique Training

A hallmark of the discipline of counselling psychology, even when compared to other branches of psychology, is the non-pathologizing and contextual lens that is used to understand individuals and the world (Canadian Psychological Association, 2009; Sinacore & Ginsberg, 2015). Counselling psychology offers alternative perspectives to mainstream cultural narratives and to the dominant medical model of understanding many things, from human behaviour to ways to alleviate human suffering (Sinacore & Ginsberg, 2015). For example, counselling psychology declares values such as strengths-based, wholistic, and client-centred approaches and considers diversity as well as cultural and social contexts (Bedi et al., 2016). This alternate approach is both valuable and pivotal in next steps for systematic change as it allows for reflexivity, exploration, and multiple perspectives. There are some strong examples of how this approach is starting to be recognized as important within Canada, including how the country turned to psychology to help address the social violence that occurred against Indigenous peoples in Canada (Canadian Psychological Association & The Psychology Foundation of Canada, 2018). Social violence has played a detrimental role in our society and throughout Canada's history, especially through the existence of residential schools. In light of the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (2015) calls to action, Canadian psychology is being recognized as a field that provides important training that is valuable to addressing the needs of Indigenous communities (Ansloos et al., 2019).

In addition to the framework of understanding counselling psychology offers, it also emphasizes a cluster of skills that have significant relational value (Bedi et al., 2016). Interpersonal skills such as validation and empathy were discussed as assets and advantages that counselling psychologists may have that can be leveraged as a unique and helpful tool when engaging in advocacy work (Goodyear et al., 2016). For example, it was discussed that these relationship-building skills may aid in the process of gaining a seat at a table of power, which is often a difficult yet needed part of trying to reach and change systems, organizations, and policy-makers.

Infiltrating and Navigating the System

Echoing Bronfenbrenner's (2005) levels of ecological systems, the working group discussed the various systems that are encountered such as microsystems, mesosystems, and macrosystems. It was highlighted throughout the working group that reaching systems effectively may not mean reaching a macrosystem right away, and advocating for one person at a time is often an important way to start. Some of the key elements that social justice aims to fight, such as stigma, are inherently cross-sectoral phenomena, which in turn require multi-level approaches and interventions (Rao et al., 2019). Social determinants of health were also discussed, emphasizing that the pursuit of larger systematic change also impacts the health of individuals. In psychology, change is targeted often at the individual level, for example through targeting individual behaviour change, processing emotions, or developing coping skills. However, it is problematic to focus on change within the individual when it is the system that is sick or toxic. In fact, sometimes an individual's behaviour, even though unhealthy or unhelpful, can be considered an adaptive response to a toxic environment (Russell-Mayhew, 2007). As such, a shift in thinking is needed in order to move interventions upstream for more systemic impact.

Members of the group asked questions about practical ways to infiltrate or change a system, and the idea was shared that first each individual must recognize what systems they are embedded in already. Each individual has a different sphere of influence from which they can start advocacy work. Ideas were also shared concerning the ways in which infiltrating a system may involve actions that look different from one individual to another: for example, for some it may look like having a long-term relationship with a people group, and for others it may look like choosing to do their dissertation on a specific topic that they feel could disrupt and/or impact a system positively.

Future Directions

Social justice in counselling psychology has previously been defined as "both a goal and a process for counsellors who believe in developing an increasingly socially just world" (Crethar & Winterowd, 2012, p. 3). The working group at the 2018 Canadian Counselling Psychology Conference echoed this definition, sharing the sentiment that there is a process involved in reaching systems, organizations, and policy-makers and that this type of work is needed in order to move the needle toward a socially just world. The lived experience that was shared throughout the working group highlighted that social justice is often understood academically, but the implementation of the action-oriented process of social justice remains unclear to many. We hope this brief report creates a compelling argument to move toward implementing more formal guidance in counselling psychology programming and professional development to support

the process of advocacy, as opposed to social justice remaining an aspirational goal that is attempted by individuals alone.

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