

Article 17

Counselor Dispositions: An Added Dimension for Admissions Decisions

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Introduction

Assessing applicants for counselor dispositions—those characteristics or variables that define an effective counselor—is a strategy that can be used by counseling programs to assist with admission decisions. Modifying Wasicsko's (2007) model, counselor educators decided to add a dispositions element as a first step in exploring a dispositions model in counselor selection. In order to illustrate how this model can be applied, examples are analyzed according to the four categories of the scale: Perception of Self; Perception of Others; Perception of Purpose; and Frame of Reference. This paper addresses strengths and limitations of this strategy, along with recommendations for developing it as a viable admissions tool.

Counselor Dispositions: An Added Dimension for Admission Decisions

The issue of how to select—or deselect—candidates for admission into counselor education programs is of ongoing interest. Markert and Monke (1990) recorded the desire of counselor education faculty to revise admission criteria to more effectively select high quality counseling candidates. Other researchers suggested that, given the limited predictive ability of traditional measures like GRE scores and undergraduate GPA, other methods of assessing counseling-related skills and personal and professional development upon admission are needed (Smaby, Maddux, Richmond, Lepkowski, & Packman, 2005). The use of a personal interview has been identified by counselor education program directors as the best screening tool (Leverett-Main, 2004). Other researchers, while acknowledging the screening interview's potential for selection, have suggested that interviewing applicants served more as a tool to deselect candidates than to select candidates (Nagpal & Ritchie, 2002). Whatever the measure, of central interest

is accurately identifying those candidates who possess the qualities valued in the counseling process and identified as desirable by counselor educators.

But what are these characteristics? One strategy is to assess whether a candidate possesses the disposition of a counselor. In considering what attributes, characteristics, variables, or qualities that an ideal counselor applicant would possess—what we are describing as his or her counseling disposition—it behooves the counselor educator to consider the literature describing effective counselor variables, since the major goal of counselor education programs is to produce effective counselors. Pope and Kline (1999) identified 22 characteristics of effective counselors: acceptance, emotional stability, open-mindedness, empathy, genuineness, flexibility, interest in people, confidence, sensitivity, fairness, warmth, friendliness, resourcefulness, sympathy, nonthreatening, tolerance for ambiguity, awareness of limitations, capability, patience, sincerity, cooperative, and sociability. Ackerman and Hilsenroth's (2003) meta-analysis of therapist characteristics and the therapeutic alliance came up with 11 therapist characteristics—flexible, experienced, honest, respectful, trustworthy, confident, interested, alert, friendly, warm, and open—that enhance the therapeutic alliance. Jennings and Skovholt (1999) identified nine categories that represent the qualities of the “master therapist” – learn voraciously, draw from their experience, value complexity and ambiguity, are self-aware and nondefensive, are mentally healthy, know how their mental health impacts their work, possess strong relationship skills, value the therapeutic alliance, and use their relationship skills in therapy.

Lambert generally listed fewer characteristics; in two of his many summaries on therapeutic outcome, he said that effective therapists tend to be described by their clients as “understanding and accepting, empathic, warm, and supportive” (Lambert & Barley, 2002, p. 26) and that the counseling relationship—vitally related to counselor variables—is conducive to client change when it is “characterized by trust, warmth, understanding, acceptance, kindness, and human wisdom” (Lambert & Ogles, 2004, pp. 180-181).

In looking specifically at counseling candidates, Nagpal and Ritchie (2002) found that their data, gleaned from interviews with counselor education faculty, suggest that a few candidate characteristics that are desirable to academic programs, such as “academic preparedness” and “professional preparedness,” are not likely to be the qualities most sought out by clients. Although counselor education programs may also select for academic qualities, on the whole the focus remains on those characteristics that will most impact the student's ability to work successfully with her or his clients.

When considering counselor dispositions, we believe there is a sense that counselor educators “know them when they see them.” Counselors and promising counseling candidates are warm rather than cold, flexible rather than rigid, interested rather than uninterested, kind rather than mean, supportive rather than unsupportive, empathic rather than unempathic. Despite what appears to be some degree of consensus about the desirable qualities of counselors, structured application of these variables or dispositions to the selection process has received little attention.

Counselor education is not the only field that has struggled with the idea of identifying candidates based on disposition. In the allied field of teacher education, there is a growing research focus on assessing dispositional characteristics in training (Diez & Rath, 2007; Smith, Skarbek & Hurst, 2005; Wasicsko, Wirzt, & Resor, 2009). The applicability of this research to the field of counseling is evident, and applying the

insights learned from dispositions in teacher education could yield significant progress in the selection, training, and evaluation of counselors.

Dispositions in Teacher Education

The increasing role of dispositions in teacher education is due in large part to standards adopted by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Educators (2008) that emphasize the importance of behaviors reflecting professional attitudes and belief systems that promote learning and student development. Dispositions have also been proposed as a tool to use in the admission process (Wasicsko et al., 2009), and in developing professional competence in teacher training programs (Stoddard, Braun, Dukes, & Koorland, 2007). There thus exists an ongoing dialogue on the broad uses of dispositions in teacher education—in screening candidates for admission into teacher training programs, in evaluating student progress in these programs, and in measuring readiness to graduate and enter the field as educators.

Many of the core dilemmas and concerns in teaching are similar to those of counseling. Like counselors, teachers significantly impact the lives of those they serve and teacher education departments have the responsibility to select candidates who have the potential to develop into the most capable teachers. While there are obviously important differences between the education of teachers and the education of counselors, there are also advantages to examining how dispositions have been studied and used in teacher education programs. One model in particular, Wasicsko's (2007) perceptual approach, can be adapted for counselor selection and training. His model is based on Combs' model of perceptual inferences of behavior, which was one of the earlier models to be used in differentiating between effective and ineffective counselors (Combs & Soper, 1963). Wasicsko's approach to teacher education, then, can serve as the basis for a timely reintroduction of Combs' work to counselors, his original audience.

Combs' broader project was concerned with what he termed perceptual psychology (Combs, Richards, & Richards, 1976), which combined elements of phenomenology, Gestalt, humanistic psychology, and systems theory, and which reflected the Zeitgeist that produced the work of Maslow, Kelly, and Rogers. In applying perceptual psychology to counselor training, Combs and Soper's (1963) study asked 29 counseling students to describe a human relations situation in which they had been involved and to critique their performance in this incident. Trained raters scored the responses according to 12 perceptual variables that had been previously identified in a prior seminar to be important in helping relationships. The authors directed raters to ask themselves "How must this person have perceived to have written of this incident this way?" (Combs & Soper, 1963, p. 224).

Wasicsko (2007) designed a perceptual rating scale based on the work of Combs and Soper (1963), grouping their findings into four categories: Perception of Self (the ability to identify with others); Perceptions of others (the ability to see students as capable); Perceptions of Purpose (the ability to perceive the larger purpose to education); and Frame of Reference (the ability to be fundamentally concerned with the human aspect of education). These categories and their associated factors were used to construct his Perceptual Dispositions Model, which is in current use as a criterion in teacher admissions (Wasicsko et al., 2009).

Application to Counselor Selection

The admission process for graduate study in counseling at a medium-sized, Mid-Atlantic state university traditionally included five elements for consideration: undergraduate academic record, standardized test performance (GRE), professional references, personal interview, and structured essay. The required essay served as a writing sample and asked applicants to describe personal activities, rationale behind choosing the course of study, life goals and ambitions, strengths and areas of improvement, and an assessment of what motivates people to act as they do.

Using Wasicsko's (2007) model, counselor educators decided to add a 'dispositions' element to the screening process for admission to master's programs in counseling and student affairs as a first step in exploring a model for using dispositions in counselor selection. The structured essay was replaced with a writing prompt based on Wasicsko's research, "Statement of Helping Relationship Incident." In this prompt, students were asked to write about a helping relationship and 1) Describe the situation as it occurred at the time, 2) What did you do in the situation? 3) How did you feel about the situation at the time you were experiencing it? and 4) How do you feel about the situation now? Would you wish to change any part of it?

Building on Wasicsko's (2007) work, we have devised the counselor perceptual rating scale (Figure 1). Combs' original scale was consulted (Combs & Soper, 1963) along with focused comparison of the aforementioned counselor and counselor candidate characteristics. This framework serves as the basis for examining the Statement of Helping Relationship Incident. In order to illustrate how this framework can be used, we offer examples and analyze the responses according to the four categories of the scale: Perception of Self; Perception of Others; Perception of Purpose; and Frame of Reference. The examples were taken from the admission files of current students matriculated in a graduate counseling program.

Perception of Self

In this category, the concern is to identify whether applicants view themselves as engaged or disengaged from others. As an example of an essay statement that reflects the engaged side of the scale, one applicant discussed a situation in which s/he was of help to the preteen daughter of a woman who had been drinking. Reportedly, the girl was scared and reached out for help. The applicant wrote, "Normally when asked to get involved in a situation where someone is actively drunk, I will offer a suggestion but I will not get involved. In this case, though, there was a child involved." In this example, the applicant displays a movement toward engagement and a willingness to get involved, as well as flexibility in her/his stance—"Normally when asked...in this case, though..."

Reflecting a more disengaged side of the scale for perception of self, one applicant described an experience leading a group in a hospital. The applicant asked a patient who was about to be discharged to attend a group the applicant was running. "The patient was very flustered and preceded [in this and other examples, identifying information is masked, but no changes are made for grammar or syntax] packing with no response after I announced the group. I again asked if he would like to join the group and he gave me a stare that was daunting. Although I was taken back by the erratic stare, I proclaimed the benefits of the group especially for someone who is being discharged. The

patient proceeded with his stare and followed me to the group room.” In this example, the applicant gives some indications that s/he sees herself/himself as removed from the

Figure 1: Counselor Perceptual Rating Scale

Perception of Self:

<u>Engaged</u> The counselor feels able to flexibly and actively engage others.	<u>Disengaged</u> The counselor sees him/herself as rigid, aloof, and distant from others.
7	1

Perception of Others:

<u>Capable and Worthy</u> The counselor regards others as capable to deal with problems in their lives. S/he sees them as worthy of respect and trust.	<u>Incapable and Unworthy</u> The counselor doubts the capacity of others to deal effectively with their lives. S/he views their efforts to solve their own problems with disrespect and mistrusts their intentions.
7	1

Perception of Purpose:

<u>Understanding and Acceptance</u> The counselor is concerned with warm understanding and open-minded acceptance of others and tolerance of their viewpoints.	<u>Judgment</u> The counselor is concerned with judging others. The counselor criticizes their behaviors and finds it difficult to accept their viewpoints.
7	1

Frame of Reference:

<u>Interested in People</u> The counselor is deeply interested in people. S/he is concerned with facilitating the expression of their thoughts and feelings.	<u>Not interested/Antagonistic toward People</u> The counselor is concerned with the impersonal aspects of affairs (e.g., in things, ideas, or data) and/or the counselor is interested in people in order to manipulate them.
7	1

Adapted from Wasicsko, 2007

patient. The “helping” was described in objective and clinical terms with little evidence of emotional engagement, connection, and caring. The description emphasizes difference and distance: the applicant “announced” and “proclaimed” and the applicant described the patient’s look as a “stare” that is “daunting” and “erratic,” which seems to question her/his ability to connect with the patient.

Perception of Others

In this category, the applicant’s perception of the inherent capability of people and their intrinsic worth is assessed. One applicant demonstrated a high degree of cognizance of the ability of people to manage their own lives, despite significant obstacles. This applicant described working as a mentor for a high school student who attended a low-performing urban high school. The student’s father was an alcoholic and her mother worked long hours; none of the student’s family had gone to college, and many had not graduated from high school. Nonetheless, this young woman wanted to become a doctor; when the applicant saw the poor quality of instruction at the high school, s/he said that “The odds were very much against her. It made me very sad to realize that she was a product of her environment and would have to work much harder than most other students entering college.” However, the applicant said that “I made sure to let her know how special she was and how unique it was to find someone as driven as her at such a young age and coming from her circumstances” and said that “I know she is a very strong person and will work very hard to excel in the rest of her high school career and college,” attesting to her/his fundamental belief in people’s ability to profitably self-direct their life, no matter their circumstances.

An example of a lower rating on this dimension is found in an applicant’s discussion of a friend’s addiction to alcohol. In it, s/he appeared to take a directive role, coaching and exhorting the friend: “One of the things I needed from him was to admit he was an alcoholic”; “over the course of four months we worked diligently on getting his health, mind and spirit back on good grounds. This included going through the twelve steps of A.A. and having him work them honestly and thoroughly”; “When helping him on what to say to his wife, I just told him to be truthful and honest, which he did, and as for the children I told him that will have to be a living amends you make to them to not go back to who you were before you were drinking.” While consistent with some approaches to addiction treatment, this applicant chose to value a helping incident in which s/he was an expert rather than a collaborator and unconcerned with personal resources and autonomy.

Perception of Purpose

In this category, the concern is over whether applicants seem to understand and accept others or are inclined to judge and to have difficulty accepting how others think and behave. One applicant showed movement from a more judging stance to a more curious and accepting position. The applicant described being a therapeutic staff support for an elementary student. Initially the applicant described her/his client in highly clinical terms, giving diagnosis and GAF score. As with the applicant who described the person s/he helped according to the lay language of addictions, this applicant described her/his client in a normative language, in this case the “science speak” of the behavioral sciences.

However, unlike the previous example, this applicant went on to discuss the girl with a perception of purpose different than diagnostic categorization. The applicant

recognized that “people were intimidated by Jane and she was labeled by her diagnosis.” The applicant said that “I realized I needed a way to ‘bond’ or ‘connect’ with Jane. I needed to empathize with her. I changed my approach in working with her. I learned to identify how Jane responded in particular situations. Instead of telling her how she was ‘wrong’ in the behavior she was displaying, I’d ask her why and what was she seeking from the present situation?”

In this example, the applicant concluded that the “lesson here that I learned, the importance of understanding, of being nonjudgmental, and listening, along with the dozens of others clients I have encountered, have greatly contributed to my desire to pursue this career path.” But what is perhaps even more telling occurs when the applicant says “It make me smile to hear that she has still retained some of her ‘quirky’ behavior even as she matures,” which indicates a potential broadening of the applicant’s ability to accept and tolerate others.

Frame of Reference

In this category, the concern is to identify whether the applicant is deeply interested in people and works to facilitate their thoughts and feelings, or whether there may be evidence that the applicant is concerned more with impersonal aspects of human interactions. In less extreme cases, an applicant may display a concern with “getting the facts right” or having the “correct” view of an interpersonal encounter; in more extreme cases, an applicant may display an interest in people in order to manipulate them or to use them for her/his own ends.

Perhaps not surprisingly, no response from the pool of responses that were examined showed an antagonistic approach to people, or an interest in manipulating people for a sense of power and control. Instead, applicants displayed an abiding interest in people. Even those who wrote about somewhat more impersonal aspects of the helping relationship tended to do so in the context of the intrinsic worth of the person(s) they helped. One candidate who worked with children with behavioral issues learned the power of token economies, saying that s/he was astounded at the power of stickers to positively influence their behavior, and s/he also used dollar store items and low cost books to motivate the children. Thus s/he did speak about how s/he was able to influence the behavior of the children; however, s/he was clear that “I learned that the best gift that I could give these children was more than books or stickers; it was showing them I believed in them, and I cared about and respect them.” S/he said that fundamentally they “desired an affirmation of their worth,” and demonstrated that the token economy system was created in service of this goal.

Discussion

To date, the dispositions component has not been used to categorically select or reject individuals who apply at the researchers’ institution. Instead, dispositions have been referred to in individual and group interviews to elicit information about the applicant’s perceptions of self and other; this information is then integrated with other aspects of his/her application. The dispositions strategy offers a paradigm that shows promise for assessment throughout a student’s academic career—in screening candidates for admission into counselor training programs, in evaluating student progress in these programs, and in

measuring readiness to graduate and enter the field as counselors. From beginning to end, students can be assessed using a simple and clear measure that was developed in light of meta-analytic outcome research on effective counselor qualities.

Our preliminary application of the counselor perceptual rating scale resulted in a change to the writing prompt that is required as part of the application for admission. The original prompt was a relatively unfocused task with an uncertain rationale and a lack of clarity on how to evaluate it; the dispositions prompt offers the applicants a focused task, and has a clear underlying rationale—to serve as data by which to make inferences about the candidate's perceptual view of the world—and a clear method of analysis.

The change of the writing prompt to a dispositional measure also opened up possibilities for use in the interviews with candidates. The helping relationship incident can serve as a springboard to inquire into the perceptions that the applicant has about him or herself as a potential helping professional, and the applicant's perception of what makes an effective counselor. The helping relationship incident asks a candidate to provide evidence to support his or her self-perception, and this evidence can be further explored in interviews.

The decision to consider applicants from the perspective of dispositions has the potential to organize the observations of faculty involved in the admissions process and to provide guidance for consideration of non-cognitive applicant data. Dispositions can become the common currency used when evaluating applicant potential at time of admission and as a basis for evaluation at strategic points throughout the counselor training program.

Limitations

The examples used in this paper were drawn from admitted students because of the need to obtain consent. As a result, there were fewer examples illustrating the negative aspects of the categories (i.e., perception of self as disengaged, perception of others as incapable and unworthy, perception of purpose as judging others, frame of reference as uninterested and/or antagonistic) than there might have been had the sample been drawn from all applicants to the program.

More broadly, it remains to be determined how accurately an admission essay and interview portray the applicant's dispositions of interest, as well as to what extent applicants with the desirable qualities are missed in this process and those who lack these qualities are falsely affirmed. Candidates, especially those with the skill to answer the question, "What are they looking for from me?" may be able to infer the kinds of responses that appear to demonstrate congruence with counselor dispositions.

There are also programmatic challenges to the implementation of this strategy. There may be skepticism on the part of faculty, which is understandable given the possible diversity of views about admission measures in general and the lack of empirical support for any particular model or practice for applicant selection. For some academic departments it may be a challenge to arrive at consensus about what dispositions are most meaningful in admission selection.

Future Directions

There exists a need for psychometric research on the proposed counselor perceptual rating scale and to develop training for inter-rater reliability in the assessment of student using the counselor perceptual scale. Even when counselor educators reach an acceptable level of agreement in their ratings of student admission essays and individual interviews using a dispositional approach, there is a need to explore the relationship between selection based on these criteria and actual performance in graduate counselor training programs and professional counseling practice.

There also exists the need to expand the study to include multiple sites and counselor training programs, in order to investigate its viability at diverse institutions, along with the need to systematically address diversity in the instrument and evaluation process. Is there any cultural bias inherent in choosing dispositions? Finally, it is important to further investigate the issue of using dispositions—or any other model—as the basis for selection, for de-selection, or both. Acceptance rates into counselor education programs are important to consider, in that if a school has a high acceptance rate, these measures may serve as screening rather than as selection.

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