

RESEARCH REPORT

Trainee perspectives on Counselling Psychology: articulating a representation of the discipline

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ABSTRACT *Nebulous and vague are descriptors that could justifiably be applied to popular and diverse notions of Counselling Psychology. In the case of Counselling Psychology, practice, education and empirical research often occurs in the absence of an explicit definition of the phenomena. Rather than supply a definition of Counselling Psychology or rely on features assumed to be significant, this paper reports on the initial stages of work towards constructing a framework capable of reflecting multiple 'definitions' of the discipline of Counselling Psychology. The present paper reports on the perspectives of Counselling Psychologists-in-training. A combination of focus group methodologies, thematic and content analytic procedures were used to elicit and subsequently analyse post-graduate Counselling Psychology trainees talk of Counselling Psychology. The text and its treatment subsequently became the focus of further talk. This collaborative procedure was applied recursively, giving rise to an evolving, representation of the field of practice as perceived by trainees. The paper concludes with an account of how the results of this study could be used to inform further investigation that will broaden the consultation process to include Chartered Counselling Psychologists.*

Preface

Counselling Psychology or Psychological Counselling: fields of practice and domains of knowledge

In undertaking the present project, the authors were struck with the profound implications of what seemed to be a small question one raised with the other. In wanting to know more about how a group of trainees in Counselling Psychology understood their discipline, the authors pondered: 'should we ask participants what they think, feel, understand or imagine Counselling Psychology or Psychological Counselling to be?' This seemingly frivolous dilemma of word order (counselling/psychology) led to some serious thinking about a distinct phenomena the first author had often described using either of those

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terms interchangeably (Counselling Psychology or Psychological Counselling). Counselling Psychology and Psychological Counselling are distinct and it is worth considering why this might be so.

Counselling is a practical activity. It is exercised across a range of fields. It is an institution (comprising rules and customs) and in certain circumstances it is also a set of specific practices, such as primary health care counselling or pre- and post-HIV counselling. Practice however is also related to theory, although it is by no means the application of it, and so it is necessary to explore briefly the epistemological issues that emerge when fields of practice such as counselling are studied (Jarvis, 1997).

Practical knowledge, theoretical knowledge, activities and disciplines

Practical knowledge is that knowledge that the practitioner has, either as a result of being taught or through learning on the job. Indeed some practical knowledge may be tacit, or merely reflect a matter of confidence that the skill performance is correct, and so no actual thought need go into why it is correct until such time as an action actually stops working or fails to meet its objectives. Jarvis argues that this:

... practical knowledge is personal and resides in the practitioner, and it might not be systematically organized in the practitioner's mind. It is rather like everyday knowledge, that is the knowledge of how to live in everyday, ordinary life. In everyday life people do not think about how they are going to behave, for a great deal of behaviour in social life has been habitualized.

(Jarvis, 1997, p. 9)

Jarvis (1997) makes the point that in everyday life we do not typically decide on which bit of philosophy, physics or ethics we are going to apply in a given situation. Indeed counselling may or may not be 'psychological' as practitioners may choose to ask themselves which bit of psychological knowledge they will apply in a given situation. Practical counselling knowledge is subjective, sometimes tacit, and a unique constellation of utilizable knowledge that often falls within the ambit of other disciplines (sometimes psychology). It is only independent in as much as it relates to fields of practice. 'Practical knowledge, therefore, is *knowledge how* to act – which is both conscious and tacit' (Jarvis, 1997, p. 10).

Knowledge *how* must also involve a number of other aspects – for instance, in order to do something well practitioners need to know the alternatives, so that practical knowledge also includes *knowledge that*, and also *knowledge why* and *knowledge when*, etc. (Jarvis, 1997). This integrated, practical knowledge can be articulated and recorded and may in turn form the basis of theoretical knowledge. This may be particularly apparent where disciplines have grown out of practical activity.

It is possible to observe behaviour, research it and gather together a body of knowledge about the practice of counselling which might be called a body of counselling knowledge or knowledge about counselling. This body of knowledge can be systematized, recorded and taught to others; it is a body of theoretical knowledge (Jarvis, 1977). This body of theoretical knowledge of counselling is a unique mixture of knowledge that can be utilized in practice, and like practical knowledge it is frequently integrated, although it can

be applied to a range of counselling settings. In a similar vein Psychological Counselling may most accurately be thought of as an 'activity' as distinct from the 'discipline' of Counselling Psychology.

In summary, it has been argued that Counselling Psychology constitutes a discipline and therefore is represented by a body of theoretical knowledge. Counselling, including Psychological Counselling, by contrast may, however, be best considered as an activity or practice, constituted by practical knowledge, which may or may not draw on formal theory. Of direct relevance to the present project, as the primary concern was with sampling and reporting upon practice within the discipline of Counselling Psychology, the authors determined to ask the participants what they *thought, felt, imagined or experienced Counselling Psychology to be?*

Introduction

Profusion and vagary are descriptors, which could justifiably be applied to popular and disparate notions of Counselling Psychology. Despite its growing tradition and the development of Counselling Psychology as a legitimate and discrete branch of psychology, definitions of the applied phenomena are diffuse and at times contradictory. The subject areas of Counselling and Psychotherapy enjoy a seniority in formal structures which exceed that of Counselling Psychology by many decades. Time alone, however, does not appear sufficient to resolve issues of identity and define the parameters of knowledge and practice.

The absence of definitional clarity is not unique to Counselling Psychology. As Prochaska and Norcross reported in a discussion of psychotherapy; depending on one's theoretical orientation, the practice may be conceptualized as:

...interpersonal persuasion, psychosocial education, professionally coached self-change, behavioural technology, a form of reparenting, the purchase of friendship, a contemporary variant of shamanism, or in its broadest sense, health care.

(Prochaska and Norcross, 1994, p. 5)

Those authors enthusiastically recounting the words of Perry London (1986) who was attributed with saying it was probably easier to practice within the discipline than to explain or define it (cited in Prochaska and Norcross, 1994, p. 5).

Feltham (1995, p. 6) suggests that a failure to resolve this dilemma and the trend towards opting for 'seductively vague' definitions may be accounted for by the perpetuation of the myth that what counselling *is* – is axiomatic – and that questions which seek to clarify the phenomena are often dismissed as academic and frivolous. In addition, the confidential nature of the context in which much counselling takes place has also been blamed for further obscuring the definitive features of this practice (Feltham, 1995). It is the contention of the present authors that a substantive definition of Counselling Psychology is of paramount importance for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the facilitation of the ethical sale and informed purchase of Counselling Psychology services (Feltham, 1995), the training of professionals (Watts and Bor, 1995), and as a foundation to the development of models of best practice.

Professional associations which transcend individual schools of thought in Counselling Psychology and psychotherapy have arguably contributed to the vagaries of existing definitions. Such organizations are charged with the responsibility of representing their members whose individual practice will vary according to the implications of the model or theory to which they subscribe. As a consequence, it is often the principles of practice reflected in meta-values, such as agreed ethical standards and guidelines, which form common links between practitioners. Such features are typically of a high level of abstraction and unlikely to be a suitable response to indignant pleas to know precisely what counselling, psychotherapy, or Counselling Psychology are.

The American Counseling Association (ACA) is reported as having no official definition of counselling (Feltham, 1995), while the British Psychological Society (BPS) defines Counselling Psychology through exclusion. The BPS appears to concern itself more with distinguishing this branch of applied psychology from other approaches to the practice of counselling rather than elaborate what constitutes the phenomena. The Regulations and syllabus for the Diploma in Counselling Psychology describe the activity of counselling as:

...concerned with the interplay between psychological principles and the counselling process and is developed by substantial reflection on practice and research. Its understandings derive both from formal psychological enquiry and from the interpersonal relationships between practitioner and the client.

(BPS, 1998, p. 1)

The implication here is that in Counselling Psychology, there is an 'emphasis on the systematic application of distinctively psychological understandings of the client and the counselling process' (BPS, 1998, p. 1). Definitions like that offered by the BPS, while unlikely to misrepresent their constituent members, who by and large know what they are doing, will add little clarity to new trainees' or consumers' desire to know precisely what happens in the Counselling Psychology context.

The British Association for Counselling goes some way towards providing a definitional framework which reflects, at least in part, constituent ingredients of the business of counselling when it suggests in its invitation to membership that counselling could be understood as occurring:

...when a person, occupying regularly or temporarily the role of counsellor, offers and agrees explicitly to give time, attention and respect to another person, or persons, who will be temporarily in the role of the client. The task of counselling is to give the client an opportunity to explore, discover and clarify ways of living more resourcefully and towards greater well-being. The counsellor provides a secure and facilitating atmosphere for this to occur.

(The British Association for Counselling, 1977)

It is perhaps some combination of constituent elements of the therapeutic process and explicit reference to the distinctly psychological nature of Counselling Psychology which may offer a way forward in the struggle to define this relatively new domain.

Given the intertwining of transcultural, interdisciplinary and transtheoretical influences on Counselling Psychology, the task of resolving semantic ambiguity and reducing

the implicative dilemmas associated with various definitional frameworks may at times seem almost insurmountable. In a postscript to a text which brings together reflections of accomplished counsellors approaching this activity from backgrounds ranging from religion, to ecology, and including philosophy, English literature, drama, education and social anthropology, Thorne and Dryden (1993) remind us that the task of marking out the common ground of counselling is far from a trifling academic luxury, but rather essential for optimal practice. Thorne and Dryden argue that:

The mysteriousness of human beings and the complex challenges of human relating require that the widest possible range of human knowledge is brought to the theory and practice of counselling.

(Thorne and Dryden, 1993, p. 173)

The idea that one can bring something unique, from their particular academic tribe, to the business of counselling, suggests that there exists some common ground upon which to hold such an interdisciplinary gathering. It is the tacit common ground of Counselling Psychology which the present authors seek to chart. In order to achieve such a task, consultations across a broad range of stakeholders would be required. The present project is perhaps best conceptualized as one important step toward this broad goal.

Rationale for a substantive definition

Genuine informed consent

There are at least three good reasons why it is necessary to work towards a substantive definition of Counselling Psychology. These include: the practitioner's capacity to achieve genuine informed consent for treatment, the benchmarking of core components of training and the maintenance of quality standards in practice. Feltham has argued convincingly in relation to the field of counselling that one area in which it is critical to strive for an accurate and non-misleading definition is at the point of delivery:

... where counselling is sold and purchased, directly or indirectly. Consumers should not be misled as to what counselling is, what it is based on, what it can and cannot achieve.

(Feltham, 1995, p. 6)

It is generally agreed that informed consent is a dimension of counselling practice which transcends the many models and contexts of counselling (Corey, 1986). In relation to psychotherapy Homles and Lindley suggest that perhaps with the exception of behaviour therapy:

...it is not generally possible to impose psychotherapy upon a completely unwilling subject, since therapy requires the co-operation of the patient. When someone agrees to have any form of psychotherapy, however, their agreement may be based on ignorance or a misunderstanding of what the therapy entails. Ensuring that consent to invasive or manipulative therapies is genuine and informed poses a serious moral dilemma for therapists.

(Homles and Lindley, 1991, p. 152)

As an ethical practitioner, one does not practice deception and manipulation as an act of malevolence. Apparently subversive practices have, however, wide acceptance within many models of therapeutic practice. Holmes and Lindley (1991) recall that paradoxical techniques are '*prima facie* an assault on the patient's autonomy' (p. 151). However, they are by no means inconsistent with the ultimate goal of the patient or client taking increased control in their lives. Here seemingly unethical conduct is justified in part by its end and the supposition that the patient has, at least implicitly, given consent to the treatment. Consent to treatment and its multitudinous implications rests on the *a priori* provision of an accurate and comprehensible definition of what is involved in treatment. It would appear that, in relation to Counselling Psychology, charting the territory of the discipline may be far from a frivolous academic luxury, it is perhaps an ethical imperative.

Implications for training

For those of us who train would-be Counselling Psychologists, we are all too familiar with our students' burning desire to know what Counselling Psychology *is*. As Watts and Bor earnestly remind us, we had better soon agree on what it is we are doing when we counsel:

... it is incumbent on all of us who teach counselling or supervise colleagues and trainees, and who seek to do so effectively and ethically, to begin to debate these issues and to provide guidelines for training and practice.

(Watts and Bor, 1995, p. 32)

Guidelines for the training and practice of Counselling Psychology require the articulation of knowledge at a low level of abstraction. One means by which this may be achieved is through the identification of the essential or definitive features of the phenomena. That is, a naming of the building blocks of professional practice and an elucidation of the links between these activities and theory.

Implications for quality standards and evaluation

The absence of a clear and meaningful definition of Counselling Psychology has implications for the maintenance of quality standards and evaluation of practice. 'All too frequently,' Feltham (1995) suggests in a discussion of counselling, 'it is not a service for which any measurements of satisfaction are offered' (p. 6), while in the context of primary care Watts and Bor (1995) petition that 'without a clear sense of the competencies of counselling, all research into the efficacy of this is potentially limited' (p. 32). It by no means requires a large leap of imagination to recognize that the business of determining if something has taken place requires the elucidation of the object of enquiry. To know if something is done adequately, efficiently, expertly, safely or ethically we need to know what this thing is. It is to this effect, the identification of what trainees see as the definitive features of Counselling Psychology, that the present project turns its attention.

Requirements of an adequate definition

In order to evaluate the success or otherwise of this project, some standard or minimum criteria must be set for the adequacy of a definition of Counselling Psychology. From their integrative perspective on psychotherapy Prochaska and Norcross propose what they see as four necessary features of an acceptable definition. These include:

First, the definition should operationalize the clinical phenomena in a relatively concrete manner. Second, it will be theoretically and, insofar as possible, semantically neutral. Third, it will eventually be consensual, subject to agreement and verification by psychotherapists of diverse persuasions. And fourth, [it] should be, for want of a better word, respectfully even handed. That is, it should treat theories equitably without sacrificing the integrity of any particular approach.

(Prochaska and Norcross, 1994, pp. 5–6)

Those authors subsequently provide their working definition of Psychotherapy as:

...the informed and intentional application of clinical methods and interpersonal stances derived from established psychological principles for the purpose of assisting people to modify their behaviors, cognitions, emotions, and/or other personal characteristics in directions that the participants deem desirable.

(Norcross, 1990, p. 218, cited in Prochaska and Norcross, 1994, p. 6)

In the authors' opinion, such a definition is adequately inclusive, however not sufficiently illuminating. Norcross (1990) goes some way towards clarifying uncertainty, but fails to identify the nuts and bolts of practice in terms of concrete and operationalizable features. It is a fine recipe in principle, however, its list of ingredients is conspicuously absent.

A framework for the adequate study of counselling psychology

Psychological investigations, regardless of their content, are structured by an intertwining of a given theoretical orientation and methodological protocol. Implicit in the various phenotypes of this meta-structure is a view of the individual. As the authors Bannister and Fransella (1977) have argued convincingly, a theoretical framework in psychology ultimately proposes values; 'A psychological theory is inevitably not only a statement about people, it is an attitude towards them, a way of relating to them' (p. 41). Rather than view the participant as simply a collection of responses orderable under some arbitrary and alien system, this study of Counselling Psychology, as the authors believe all psychological research should, endeavours to incorporate a theoretical orientation which will accommodate a view of participants as active construers (Viney, 1987). Individuals can make and revise meanings subsequent to reflection and this method capitalizes on the uniquely human potential (Cross and Watts, 1998).

Aim

The task we set ourselves therefore was to collaboratively develop a framework capable of accommodating trainees' perceptions of what they think, feel, imagine or understand Counselling Psychology to be.

Method

The description of the method is limited to an overview of procedure. The interested reader is referred to Cross and Watts (1998) for a fuller account.

Participants

Two groups of post-graduate students in Counselling Psychology, at different levels of post-graduate study, were invited to participate in the present investigation. It is often a requirement of psychological research involving students that the researcher defends claims of sampling practices of convenience rather than relevance. Such investigators are required to account for, and resolve, any differences between the population of interest and their student sample. This study offers quite a different rationale for enlisting trainees as co-participants within the present investigation. Counselling Psychologists-in-training are worthy informants regarding the phenomena of interest. Their perspectives arise out of naive interest and the demands of training. Trainees are required to participate in counselling as both clients and counsellors, act it out in the form of role-play, observe others practising it, audio or video tape their practice, read about it, write about it and reflect on it. Students of Counselling Psychology are practitioners in training and as such they are primed for, and by-and-large keen to, articulate their knowledge of the phenomena.

Procedure

Participants were informed in great detail of the aims and protocol of the investigation, both in order to achieve their fully informed consent and to set the stage for what we aimed to be a uniquely transparent research endeavour. The data collection process was organized into three stages:

Stage 1. This involved the facilitation of two independent focus groups, directed at articulating what each group understood Counselling Psychology to be. Discussions were moderated by the first author in line with standard focus group practice (Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1993; Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). Groups 1 and 2 spoke for a period of approximately 45 minutes. The groups' talk was recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were later subjected to a thematic analysis and this initial classification led to the development of a conceptual framework for Counselling Psychology. Textual data was managed using the Q.S.R. NUD.IST (Version 3) application which enabled the construction of a hypothetical model comprised of category titles and definitions clustered into groups of conceptual similarity and tied together through a series of hierarchical linkages.

Stage 2. This stage of the data collection process involved the provision of individual copies of the transcript (from their respective focus group meeting), and the evolving descriptive framework. The initial framework or model was constructed by the first author subsequent to an analysis the transcripts from focus group sessions. This analysis involved the identification and grouping of themes and elements which were reported by participants as constituting the phenomena of Counselling Psychology. For each theme or element within the text a working title, definition and place within the evolving model was established.

Upon meeting, each group were asked to comment on:

1. the adequacy of the transcript for defining the phenomena of Counselling Psychology;

2. the validity of researcher interpretations reflected in the definitional model; and
3. the utility of the method for describing and or revising personal meaning and the creation of shared 'knowledge'.

The groups' response to recursive questioning became text which in turn was subjected to further analysis.

Stage 3. This stage of the research protocol sought to elicit feedback from Groups 1 and 2 arising out of the second focus group meeting. This feedback was subsequently integrated into the evolving definitional framework and is summarized in Figure 1.

Results

Figure 1 represents the revised definitional model of Counselling Psychology, constructed from the feedback of participants following their reflection on the framework presented at Stage 2 of the research exercise.

The model of Counselling Psychology presented here comprises a structure divided at its highest level into the branches '*what Counselling Psychology is*' and '*what Counselling Psychology is not*'. The utilization of this definitional device by participants is interesting, suggesting that to know what something '*is*' you must know what it '*is not*'. From the model, under the branch '*what Counselling Psychology is not*', the nodes; '*Friendship*', '*Personal Advice*', '*Conversation*', '*Do For*', '*Colluding Reassurance*' and '*Forever*', may be seen.

The constituents of Counselling Psychology are represented within the model under the five nodes: '*Counsellor Qualities*', '*Theory/Model*', '*Client Contribution*', '*Ethics*' and '*Bounded Relationship*'. Each of the five second order nodes are further sub-classified by subordinate nodes which provide additional detail regarding what constitutes each definitional element of Counselling Psychology.

Counsellor Qualities. These for example are sub-divided into three broad categories, including: '*Activity*', '*Personal Development*', and '*Commitment*'. '*Activity*', a sub-node of '*Counsellor Quality*', included a range of events such as: challenging clients, or the use of paradox where appropriate. Counsellor reflection on the inter and intra-personal process, client informed consent, agenda and goal setting, stimulating motivation and enabling were all seen as important contributions of the counselling psychologist. Of particular interest was the node '*Scientist/Practitioner*' implying that initial assessment, establishing a baseline and evaluation were tasks falling within the remit of a counselling psychologist.

'*Personal Development*' and '*Commitment*' were identified as further sub-categories of '*Counsellor Qualities*'. Notions of personal development were linked to participants reflection on both professional and private experiences which influenced their practice. These sub-nodes grew from the suggestion that practitioners needed to possess the capacity to integrate sometimes disparate and fragmented knowledge threads into both a personally and professionally meaningful whole.

Theory/Model. This broad sub-category was seen by participants to be linked to variation in training, which placed particular emphasis on the content and nature of

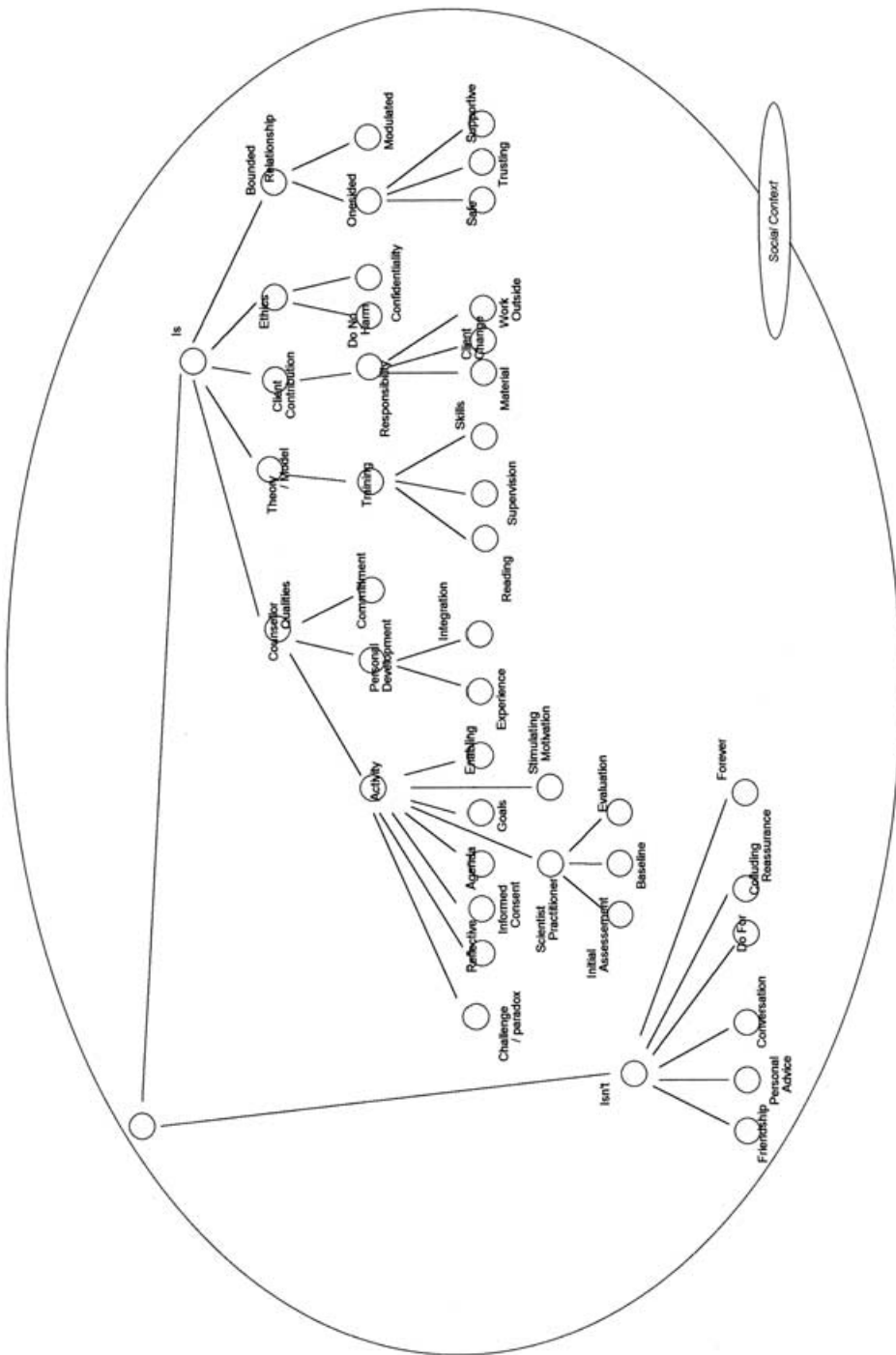


FIG. 1

the specific activities such as reading, supervision and skill acquisition. In particular, it was acknowledged by participants that the nature and scope of training, and the activities, including reading, supervision and skill acquisition, all varied enormously across the theoretical models the counselling psychologist-in-training subscribed to.

Client Contribution. Within this model the clients' contribution to the process of Counselling Psychology was recognized and highlighted through the definitional node 'Client Contribution'. In particular clients were seen as charged with a range of responsibilities including the provision of material for sessions, to work outside sessions and ultimately to change.

Bounded Relationship. This node was identified to account for a range of comments by participants relating to the unique qualities of the therapeutic relationship. Those specific qualities of the relationship identified by participants as central to Counselling Psychology included the purposefully one-sided nature of the interaction arising from a focus on the client and the climate of safety, trust and support. Lastly, participants expressed the need to incorporate an acknowledgement of social context into their model of Counselling Psychology. Figuratively, this was achieved by enclosing the hierarchical representation of Counselling Psychology within the parameter of 'Social Context'. Notionally, this addition to the model acknowledges the social, cultural and temporal influences on the practice of Counselling Psychology.

Discussion

In returning to the criteria proposed by Prochaska and Norcross (1994), it may be possible to evaluate the success or otherwise of this attempt to chart a descriptive model of the field of practice of Counselling Psychology based on the perceptions of trainees. In terms of their criteria of *concreteness*, the hierarchical model, broadly defined by the parental nodes of Counsellor Qualities, Theory/Model, Client Contribution, Ethics and Bounded Relationship all give rise to subordinate nodes or activities of increasing specificity. Examples of the lower order nodes within the model, such as Challenge/Paradox, Agenda (setting), Reading, and Work Outside (the session), provide evidence of a firm and explicit foundation of the definitional structure. Elucidation of activities at a low level of abstraction goes some way toward concretizing what Counselling Psychology is seen to be.

Theoretical and semantic neutrality were also objectives determined by Prochaska and Norcross (1994) as essential to an adequate definition of a field of practice. Acknowledgement within the evolving model of Counselling Psychology that Theory/Model is both superordinant (in being at the peak of the hierarchical structure) and that it is unspecified is seen as consistent with those authors' imperatives. Indeed significant scope exists within the model to specify the unique implications of particular theories, models and approaches to understanding people in the pursuit of the practice of Counselling Psychology. Here the heuristic potential of the framework is clearly evident. What differences in the perceptions of trainees as contrast chartered practitioners and what, if any, differences occur across orientation length of practice?

Prochaska and Norcross (1994) also suggest that definitional models should eventually be consensual and subject to agreement and verification by practitioners of diverse persuasions. As a starting place for the realization of this objective, the results of this study offer both stimulus material, in the form of an evolving representation, and a protocol from which a more representative model may be derived.

Perhaps the most challenging requirement of Prochaska and Norcross' (1994) adequate definition is the call to treat theories equitably without sacrificing the integrity of any particular approach. Within the definitional structure as outlined, there exists the potential to elaborate the specific implications of the adoption of a particular theoretical stance. This elaboration would require the explication of unique activities arising as a consequence of the approach. In doing so, experts could be called upon to identify the 'nuts and bolts' of theoretically guided practice within the broader discipline of Counselling Psychology. The sampling of practitioners from a range of theoretical modalities seems a clear next step in the evolution of this research enterprise. Trainees, educators and consumers alike could benefit from the establishment of a frame within which the components of Counselling Psychology in general may be explicated, with this frame offering the scope to emphasize or highlight the particularities of various models or theories. These distinctions would be readily visible within the proposed model through the examination of the specific implications or activities indicated as integral to particular theoretical perspectives on practice.

Conclusion

Through attending to the formal and experiential knowledge base of our research co-participants we were able to identify and articulate a structural model which Counselling Psychology trainees may use to make sense of the enterprise of Counselling Psychology. This method provided participants with the opportunity to reflect upon the adequacy of the framework articulated and subsequently identify what for them represented a more adequate description of the phenomena of interest.

Research such as this, adopting a stance of mutual orientation (Viney, 1987), does acknowledge the evolutionary quality of personal and shared knowledge and is thus poised to profit from the human capacity to generate, reflect upon and revise meaning (Cross and Watts, 1998). This capacity has been applied fruitfully to the task of illuminating what it is that constitutes the phenomena of Counselling Psychology for trainees. In generating a descriptive framework, however, this model, as represented in Figure 1, has only just reached the starting gates. In order to achieve an unequivocal and truly robust definition, broad and ongoing consultation would be required involving trainees, accomplished practitioners, educators and consumers alike. Only after completing these successive phases through research, could one be bold enough to claim that they had arrived at an operational definition of Counselling Psychology.

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