

A Developmental Focus: Implications for Counsellor Education

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Abstract

This article provides a rationale for the use of cognitive developmental theory as a framework for counsellor education, discusses the implications for preparation programs, and suggests evaluation and research possibilities in this area.

Résumé

Cet article fournit une analyse raisonnée en faveur de la théorie du développement cognitif comme cadre de l'éducation en counseling. Il en discute les implications pour les programmes de formation de même qu'il en suggère les possibilités d'évaluation et de recherches.

During the last twenty-five years, a number of researchers and theorists have suggested cognitive developmental theory as a framework for counselling and subsequently counsellor education. Kohlberg (1975) advocated for a model in which: (a) the role of counselling would be reconceptualized as an educational intervention to stimulate cognitive and affective development, and (b) the role of counsellor education would encompass training experiences to prepare counsellors for these new activities. In 1987, Ivey and Goncalves predicted a major shift in focus in counsellor education from theories of counsellor action to a new and revitalized focus on human development. More recently, a series of programs at the 1996 Conference of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision were devoted to the use of developmental and constructivist principles as a new paradigm for counsellor preparation.

While some indications of this predicted paradigm shift are apparent (e.g., the inclusion of developmental theories in CACREP standards, related presentations at professional conferences), the application of this theoretical framework to counselling practice and preparation is far from complete. Although the counselling profession has claimed a developmental focus as one of its defining characteristics, many counsellors struggle to integrate the developmental/wellness/preventive approach with the medical/illness/deficit model that has prevailed within mental health professions. Particularly within counsellor education, the principles and concepts from this approach have yet to be fully and systematically incorporated. Instead, counsellor preparation continues

to be plagued by the same lack of directing constructs and research affecting other areas of professional education (Sprinthall, Reiman, & Thies-Sprinthall, 1993).

The purposes of this article are to: (a) briefly provide a rationale for the use of cognitive developmental theory as a framework for counsellor education, (b) discuss the implications for preparation programs, and (c) suggest evaluation and research possibilities in this area.

RATIONALE

Theoretical Background

Cognitive developmental theory encompasses the work of a number of theorists in a variety of domains. Examples of these domains include: cognitive development (Piaget, 1950); ego development (Loevinger, 1976); ethical reasoning (Kohlberg, 1969); and conceptual level (Hunt, 1975). While these areas represent different dimensions of development rather than a single monolithic definition of the process, there are commonalities across domains concerning explanations for behaviour, the nature of change, and the defining characteristics of higher stage outcomes.

As a basic point of similarity, these approaches reflect stage theories of development in which stage is defined as a unique, distinct, and consistent cognitive system for processing information (Sprinthall & Collins, 1988). These models include hierarchical stages characterized by increasingly abstract and flexible cognitions. Through this particular developmental perspective—unlike the view associated with environmentalist or maturational theories—behaviour is seen as resulting from the interaction of heredity, environment, and time (Hayes, 1991). Thus, inherited potential can be nourished or stifled depending on the type, amount, quality, and timing of environmental encounters.

Across these domains of development, stage change represents qualitative transformations from concrete to abstract methods of processing experience, from less to more complex repertoires for problem-solving. Changes in these cognitive structures are possible through interaction with the environment and the resulting state of disequilibrium. As individuals encounter something slightly different in their experience or environment, a process for understanding or adapting the new to the old is set in motion. Piaget (1950) delineated this process of adaptation as being composed of two complementary parts: assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation refers to the attempt to incorporate the new information into the current system or structure. Aspects of the new experience which challenge the current structure require the process of accommodation or a modification of the organizational system. This change in the existing organization will in turn result in a more complex

structure for understanding and thinking about self, interpersonal relationships, and ethical decisions.

Relationship to Counselling Behaviours

Applying this theoretical framework to counselling, researchers have begun to examine relationships between these stages of development of the counsellor in a variety of specific domains and various counselling behaviours. Significant links have been found between cognitive complexity and empathy (Strohmer, Biggs, Haase, & Purcell, 1983); moral development and empathic response (Bowman & Allen, 1988; Bowman & Reeves, 1987); ego development and perceptions of clients (Borders, Fong, & Neimeyer, 1986); and ego development and affective sensitivity (Carlozzi, Gaa, & Liberman, 1983). These studies indicate that counsellors at higher stages of development are more empathic, less likely to define clients or themselves in negative terms, more likely to objectively analyze their reactions to their clients, and exhibit a greater awareness of the interactive nature of the counselling relationship. In short, counsellors at higher stages of development appear better equipped to deal with the complex problem-solving and social interaction required within the counselling process. Thus, although these represent preliminary findings and much research still remains to be done in this area, there appears to be initial evidence that counsellor development results in better counselling which in turn can contribute to client development.

A COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH TO PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

These positive relationships between stage of development and desired counselling behaviours raise an important question for counsellor educators and supervisors. Can development be stimulated or promoted? A number of research studies would seem to say yes. A meta-analysis related to conceptual level (Holloway and Wampold, 1986) suggests that "instructional environments could be designed to meet the learning needs of different types of thinkers" (p. 318). A number of research studies (Bernier, 1980; Glassberg & Sprinthall, 1980; Oja & Sprinthall, 1978; Paisley 1990; Peace, 1995; Sprinthall & Thies-Sprinthall, 1983) have demonstrated that it is possible to promote development through the provision of carefully designed educational experiences. Programs that have been successful in stimulating stage change have had several components in common: a significant role-taking experience, a balance of challenge and support, an opportunity for reflection, and a sense of continuity.

Components of Successful Programs

Role-taking refers to the placement of an individual in a new situation or experiential set which requires "stretching" or the use of slightly more

complex skills and processing than currently employed. The role-taking needs to be real and significant rather than simulated or routine. This experience also needs to be examined through reflection, with individuals being given an opportunity to process feelings and to understand their experiences from different perspectives. The most significant effects from the use of reflection have been with systematic guidance (Sprinthall, Reiman, & Thies-Sprinthall, 1993).

Balance is also apparently needed in relation to challenge and support. As outlined earlier, Piaget's state of disequilibrium is central to development. While this state of dissonance may be necessary and may be growth producing, it is not without pain or loss. Personal support for individuals facing challenge is essential. Thus, effective educators must constantly monitor and adjust the balance of challenge and support provided to students so that students continue to move forward to embrace educational challenges without becoming overwhelmed by them.

Finally, programs designed to promote development need to provide continuity. This component involves a somewhat longer time commitment, most probably six months to a year in order to be effective. Brief interventions may be appropriate for sharing information or general awareness but not for promoting development. Developmental change takes time and requires deliberate and sustained efforts.

Specific Strategies

Certain specific strategies or concepts also appear helpful in promoting development. Dilemma discussions which attend to the ideas associated with plus-one reasoning provide an opportunity for secondary role-taking and provoke disequilibrium. More significantly, the particular environment created in education or counselling is critical.

Dilemma discussions. In schools, a particular approach used to promote development is dilemma discussion (Sprinthall & Collins, 1988). This involves the presentation of open-ended dilemmas for discussion and analysis. The teacher or counsellor serves as a facilitator. The purpose of discussion is for students to think through and articulate their own reasoning about decisions. The process also gives them an opportunity to hear the reasoning and ideas of others. Facilitators are not involved in lecturing or providing "right answers" but instead focus on clarifying the levels of reasoning.

A factor of considerable significance in dilemma discussion is plus-one reasoning. Within developmental domains, individuals have a modal stage of development, indicating their general method of processing experience. While students and clients will be able to understand all of the levels of reasoning below their own, they will usually only comprehend one stage above. The slightly more complex reasoning of one stage above is generally attractive or intriguing to individuals. More than that is

overwhelming and will not be beneficial in any real way. Allowing students to listen to reasoning one level up from their own tends to provoke thought and in turn promote development.

Many experiences in educational or clinical settings provide authentic dilemmas for individual reflection and group discussion. Because typical groups involve both diversity of opinion and at least two stages of development (Kuhmerker, 1991), these authentic dilemmas provide an excellent opportunity for integrating the promotion of development within any environment.

Creation of Just Communities. Relatedly, as Kuhmerker (1991) suggests, there comes a time at which "the point is not to invent a more realistic dilemma . . . but to move to real-life issues of fairness in the school or other educational setting" (p. 86). The concept of the just community involves the creation of a total environment which focuses on moral development and moral action. As Kohlberg applied this concept to schools, his original intent was to teach a particular orientation toward justice and fairness. Others, such as Ralph Mosher in Brookline Massachusetts' School-Within-A-School, emphasized the democratic process itself (Kuhmerker, 1991). Two particularly significant ideas, however, seem to permeate most applications or adaptations of the just community: (a) direct and shared democracy and (b) participation by all members of the community based on equal rights and responsibilities. Involving individuals in the creation and implementation of policies and rules which will govern them seems to be an important factor in promoting development.

Person-Environment Fit. An additional more broadly-based component in promoting development is the concept of person-to-environment fit. To facilitate development, educators and counsellors need to match and, then constructively, mismatch the learning activities with the developmental level of the student or client (Hunt, 1975). This technique involves assessing where the individual is, using this information or level as a starting point, and then gradually employing more complex methods of instruction. This movement toward constructive mismatch is similar to plus-one reasoning with an underlying purpose of provoking thought and promoting development to the next stage.

Hunt (1975) emphasized the importance of this developmental view in relation to creating appropriate environments. He noted that, in implementing person-environment matching, a teacher should not only take into account the student's current needs by providing whatever structure is required, but also view the present need for structure on a developmental continuum along which growth toward independence and less need for structure would be the long-term objective.

This message is important for counsellors and counsellor educators to internalize also. We need to: (a) provide the optimal levels of structure and experience for students' or clients' current levels of functioning, and (b) design sufficiently challenging environments in which they can move along that developmental continuum. Outcomes associated with such movement would be more complex structures for processing experience and higher levels of cognitive, ethical, and interpersonal maturity.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLOR EDUCATION

Using a developmental framework should raise a number of questions for counsellor educators:

- (a) Are we thoroughly incorporating the content from developmental theory into our course work?
- (b) Are we designing our own programs in developmental terms: i.e. providing an environment and experiences which promote the development of our graduate students?
- (c) Are we conducting research on the outcomes of our programs using developmental measures?

Content of the Curriculum. If counselling can be reconceptualized as an opportunity for developmental growth for clients, then counsellors must have knowledge concerning developmental theory. Theories which provide a framework for understanding healthy development must be given equal importance and must be presented along with traditional theories of counsellor action.

Graduate students must also be trained for this new and expanded role as facilitators of client development. Through their graduate training, they must acquire knowledge and skills that will enable them to create learning experiences to acknowledge and promote development. Dilemma discussion, plus-one reasoning strategies, just environments, and reflection forums need to become parts of the content of our curricula. These approaches need to be modeled as well as presented, so that students learn how to promote clients' development as well as having their own development facilitated.

In practica and internships, students must be challenged to view their roles in different ways whether practicing in schools, universities, or agencies. Counsellors can be encouraged to include developmental concepts in assessment and to conceptualize cases from a developmental perspective. Adding this dimension to case conceptualization and assessment means asking new questions:

- *Cognitively, is this client capable of abstract thought?* If not, then many of our counselling interventions which ask clients to make generalizations based on a collection of past experiences may be ineffective.
- *Ethically, what motivates this student's or client's behaviour?* The answer to this question may provide very helpful guidelines to determine the most appropriate intervention.

- *Interpersonally, is the person capable of taking another's perspective?* If not, asking that individual to tell you how others in a conflict feel will be difficult or impossible. The "I don't know" in that case does not represent resistance.
- *Conceptually, how much structure does this client need?* Clients at lower stages of development in this domain may need more information and direction. Those at higher stages will be able to deal with greater levels of ambiguity, and in fact, may seem offended or frustrated by the imposition of too much structure.

Aside from assessment and case conceptualization issues, in many settings, students will also need to carefully examine the traditional focus on individual counselling. Consideration must be given to available resources, cultural backgrounds of clients, and needs and norms of their work setting. Beyond these environmental issues, participation in a group or an outreach program might also reflect a much more appropriate direction in order to promote client or student development. Group interventions often provide a more authentic social context for certain clients and issues than individual counseling. The counsellor in those cases can be most effective by being a facilitator or change agent rather than an individual therapist.

Program Design. If, as research is beginning to indicate, stage of development is correlated with desired counselling behaviours, then program design in counsellor education becomes a critical concern. If counsellors at higher stages of development are more effective, are we providing a preparation program which stimulates their development? The previously-mentioned components of successful interventions can provide a significant beginning point for thinking about our graduate counselling programs as intentional developmental processes.

Generally speaking, graduate programs do provide a *significant role-taking experience* and sufficient *challenge* to students. Most, also, represent a two-year time commitment which can, if used appropriately, provide a sense of *continuity*. As counsellor educators, we more likely need to check program designs for the particular type of environment we have created. Are we providing appropriate amounts of *support*, opportunities for guided or systematic *reflection*, and openness to democratic decision-making? For example, mentoring programs for first-year students, graduate student associations, and collegial relationships with faculty provide the type of supportive balance often needed. Gathering students in small groups for periodic evaluations of the graduate experience can give valuable feedback to the program but can also allow students to personalize and incorporate meaning from activities. Involving students in decision-making concerning program policies, plans, and issues can begin to bring the just community to counsellor education. For example, students can be included in at least some faculty meetings, encouraged to share ideas for new courses or other learning experiences, and given a voice in part of the decision-making in which program faculty are regularly involved.

Course Design. Individual courses can also be constructed based on developmental principles. Requirements must be sufficiently challenging to “cognitively stretch” students. The atmosphere of the class needs to provide support for development and incorporate principles of democratic decision-making. Activities can be designed which encourage role-taking through discussion or service projects or which provide time for reflection such as journal writing or small group interaction. Both authors have involved students in course design, by requiring them to create (as a group) the syllabus for a particular course and by requiring students to develop individual learning plans and projects to meet their own unique learning objectives within the course. Experiences such as these provide students with both the structure and the challenge to take responsibility for their own learning by reflecting on their own goals, translating goals into action plans, and working together with others collaboratively to develop activities and experiences to promote their own development.

In clinical training, the experiences students commonly have in internship and practicum provide a rich and authentic context for reasoning about a variety of issues. Often, we think of dilemmas only in terms of ethical decisions. While there *are* numerous ethical and legal issues with which the beginning counsellor must struggle, in fact, *every* decision that is made becomes a reasoned professional choice. Thus, seminars associated with internship and practicum can provide opportunities for discussions of ethical questions, treatment plans, group structures, or strategies that focus not only on the specific choice made but the reasoning behind that decision. These discussions allow students to listen to the professional judgment processes of their peers and professors.

Collaborative groups and cooperative learning projects can motivate development and perspective-taking through the process of social negotiation. Faculty should be encouraged to use their courses to promote development as well as to teach a particular body of knowledge and skills. Higher levels of development are characterized by increased self-directed learning. By using a plus-one approach in graduate coursework and in supervised internship experiences, counsellor educators can help students “learn how to learn” and develop an appreciation for the need to reflect on their experiences through such action as clinical supervision and peer consultation.

Program Evaluation. If we accept promoting development as a goal for counsellor preparation, then program evaluation will need to include new variables. Often, in the past, we have assumed rather than assessed development as a program outcome. Rest (1984) suggested the construction of a research agenda which would include the development of relevant assessment instruments which would be used to: (a) appraise

entering students; (b) evaluate the effectiveness of educational programs; and, (c) ascertain the competence of graduating professionals.

A number of assessment instruments already exist which can be used in helping counsellor educators carry out the type of student and program evaluation which Rest suggests. Those most commonly used in counselling research and literature are the Hunt (1978) conceptual level (CL) test, the Rest (1974) Defining Issues Test (DIT), and Loevinger's Sentence Completion (Loevinger, 1979). Whether using these instruments or new and specifically developed assessment devices, it is critical that counsellor education programs begin to evaluate their own effectiveness in promoting the development of students.

SUMMARY

Counsellors at higher stages of development appear to be better equipped to handle the complex tasks associated with their professional role. Counsellor educators, therefore, have a particular responsibility to provide environments and experiences in graduate preparation which not only allow for the acquisition of knowledge and skills but also opportunities for personal development.

Much work remains to be done in the application of cognitive developmental theory in counsellor education programs. A developmental focus will require a particular philosophy and commitment. To thoroughly incorporate these ideas, the principles from developmental theory must: (a) affect the learning environments we create; (b) be apparent in our program content, design, and delivery; and, (c) be supported by research conducted not only to evaluate program outcomes but also to compare models of counsellor preparation.

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