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## A Reconsideration of Dispositional Assessment in Counselor Education

### Abstract

Counselor dispositions have increasingly taken an important role in the selection and subsequent training of counseling students. Yet, counselor educators continue to lack inventories or rating scales that reliably measure dispositional constructs that have been connected to counselor effectiveness. Evaluating prospective and current counseling students based on unproven dispositional measures is inconsistent with counseling organizations' codes of ethics and may subject counselor educators to legal liability. The purpose of this article is to review the current state of dispositional assessment in counselor education, describe recent research on therapist effects in the outcome literature, and offer suggestions for improving dispositional assessment.

### Keywords

dispositional assessment, counselor education training, therapist effects, facilitative interpersonal skills

Dating back to at least the work of Rogers (1942, 1957), there has been a recognition that the personal attributes or dispositions of a counselor may be as important—or even more important—than the counselor’s scholastic aptitude, theoretical orientation, or professional training. Subsequent to the early work of Rogers (1942, 1957), counselor educators have attempted to further refine the specific dispositions possessed by effective counselors and use this knowledge to inform the selection and training of future counselors (Freeman et al., 2019; Spurgeon et al., 2012). Not only has an emphasis on counselor dispositions permeated the counseling literature (Spurgeon et al., 2012), but the importance of counselor dispositions has also become institutionalized in the accreditation standards of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2016; Garner et al., 2020). Counseling programs accredited by CACREP are required to assess the dispositions of their students both at the time of admission and throughout their matriculation in their respective programs. According to Section 4. G. of the 2016 standards,

The counselor education program faculty systematically assesses each student’s professional dispositions throughout the program. The assessment process includes the following: (1) identification of key professional dispositions, (2) measurement of student professional dispositions over multiple points in time, and (3) review or analysis of data.

Though the 2016 CACREP standards recognize general dispositions such as interpersonal skills and cultural sensitivity, CACREP delegates to individual programs the specific dispositions that these programs deem to be most important for their individual programs.

Notwithstanding the importance of dispositional assessment in accreditation standards (CACREP, 2016) and throughout the counselor education literature (Freeman et al., 2019,

Spurgeon et al., 2012), there is remarkably minimal research on validated measures of counselor dispositions. As Garner et al. (2020) recently observed, “Dispositional assessment is in its infancy, especially when applied to counselor education in general and to program admissions in particular” (p. 347). Because of this deficiency, accredited counselor education programs have been put in a *double bind*. They are required by CACREP to continuously monitor the dispositions of their students, but there continues to be an absence of validated measures of counselor dispositions for discharging this responsibility. Because of this, counselor educator programs may be reaching important decisions about admitting and retaining students based on erroneous ratings of counselor dispositions. Such practices raise important ethical concerns. In working with clients, counselors have a clear ethical responsibility to use assessment inventories and related procedures that have been validated for the specific decision at hand (American Counseling Association, 2014; American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education, 2014). Yet, in evaluating prospective and current counseling students, counselor education programs may be relying on dispositional measures or rating scales that have not been demonstrated to meet even the most minimal psychometric standards. In addition to ethical concerns, high stakes decisions about students based on questionable dispositional measures could also expose counselor education programs to legal liabilities (Miller et al., 2020)

The lack of validated measures of counselor dispositions should not be interpreted to mean that such dispositions are unimportant. As will be reviewed shortly, researchers have found strong evidence for the importance of *therapist effects* on the outcome of counseling and psychotherapy. In fact, this research indicates that therapist effects—individual differences in effectiveness across counselors and other therapists—have a stronger impact on the outcome of counseling than

professional training, clinical experience, or the use of specific theoretical models (Wampold & Owen, 2021). For that reason, counselor educators are justified in advocating for the importance of counselor dispositions in both the initial selection and training of future counselors. However, to be fair to both prospective and current students, counselor educators need reliable dispositional measures that predict not only success in the classroom, but also more importantly, success with actual clients in clinical settings.

In response to these concerns, the main objective of this article is to make the case for a fundamental reconsideration of dispositional assessment in counselor education. Toward this end, I will first review the current status of dispositional assessment in counselor education, highlighting the absence of any dispositional measurement tools that accurately predict counselor performance. Second, I will summarize the recent literature on therapist effects with specific attention to the role of facilitative interpersonal skills in predicting client improvement. Finally, I will present several ideas and recommendations for current practices and future research in dispositional assessment.

### **Current Status of Dispositional Assessment**

As mentioned previously, CACREP requires accredited counseling programs to monitor the dispositions of their students throughout their enrollment in their respective programs. For the most part, accredited counseling programs are allowed to select the dispositions they deem to be most important as well as the manner in which these dispositions will be assessed. Though specific examples of dispositional assessments are occasionally published in the literature, there has not been any systematic research on how counseling programs typically assess and monitor the dispositions of their counseling students. Regarding admissions, the minimal research that is available suggests that admission committees often use individual and group interviews to initially

assess for counselor dispositions (Hosford et al., 1984; Leverett-Main, 2004; Nagpal & Ritchie, 2002; Swank & Smith-Adcock, 2014). This practice is problematic because interviews, especially ones that are unstructured, often lead to unreliable evaluations that may be contaminated by rater biases (Nagpal & Ritchie, 2002). In conducting these interviews, counselor educators are unlikely to be exempt from the biases that commonly impact other interview situations. For example, researchers have found that interview ratings are often biased by several extraneous factors, such as physical attractiveness (Watkins & Johnston, 2000), body mass (Agerström & Rooth, 2011), pregnancy status (Bragger et al., 2002), disability status (Brecher et al., 2006), gender (Latu et al., 2015), race (de Kock & Hauptfleisch, 2018), social class (Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016), and even vocal accents (Purkiss et al., 2006). Biases and rater errors also likely accompany other potential indices of applicants' dispositions, such as submitted personal statements. As noted by Miller et al. (2020), "Although proxy measures of dispositions (e.g., reference letters, applicant interviews, statements of professional goals) are commonly used during admissions processes in counselor education programs, little evidence of their reliability and validity has been reported in the literature" (p. 217).

There have been a few standardized measures of counselor dispositions described in the counseling literature, although it is unclear the extent to which these measures have been adopted by accredited counseling programs. Examples of dispositional measures include the Counseling Competencies Scale (CCS; University of Central Florida Counselor Education Faculty, 2004), the Professional Disposition Competence Assessment (PDCA; Garner et al., 2016; Garner et al., 2020), and the Professional Dispositions Scale-Counseling Student Version (PDS-CSV; Miller et al., 2020). For the most part, researchers have found that these dispositional measures provide generally reliable scores. However, researchers have not yet connected scores on these measures

to validated measures of counselor performance. The one exception was research conducted by Swank et al. (2012) on the psychometric properties of the CCS. Swank et al. found a moderate correlation ( $r = .41$ ) between CCS scores and final practicum grades for a small sample of students ( $n = 43$ ). However, this validity coefficient provides rather limited information on the validity of the CCS as a unique measure of counselor dispositions. The CCS was developed to be a general measure of counselor competency. It not only includes items that measure dispositions (e.g., self-awareness), but also items that measure counseling skills (e.g., reflection) and professional behaviors (e.g., record keeping). Thus, the validity coefficient reported in this study does not provide direct evidence for the validity of the CCS as a specific measure of counselor dispositions.

One factor that may have hindered the development of validated dispositional measures is the nature of previous research on counselor dispositions. Over the years, counselor educators and other clinicians have generated numerous lists of hypothesized counselor dispositions believed to capture the essential characteristics of effective counselors (Corey, 2012; Garner et al., 2016; Pope & Kline, 1999; Spurgeon et al., 2012). The hypothesized counselor dispositions published in the literature—and included on some dispositional measures—have been derived from the expert opinions of counselor educators, or in the case of the PDS-CSV (Miller et al., 2020), currently enrolled counseling students. Though many of these hypothesized dispositions seem intuitively appealing (e.g., open-mindedness, self-awareness), these dispositions have not been connected to success as a counseling student, or more importantly, as a professional counselor. Rather than selecting counselor dispositions from the subjective opinions of counselor educators or students, it might be more effective to identify important dispositions from the outcome literature on therapist effects.

### **Research on Therapist Effects**

Much of the research on the effectiveness of counseling and psychotherapy has focused on the presumed role of theoretical models or manualized treatments in bringing about client improvement (Wampold & Owen, 2021). In this research paradigm, therapists—so long as they were generally competent and compliant with the treatment model under investigation—have been viewed as almost interchangeable and even extraneous to the effectiveness of counseling and psychotherapy (Anderson, Crowley et al., 2016; Wampold & Owen, 2021). However, in recent years, there has been a stronger focus on the importance of the people responsible for delivering these psychosocial interventions, an area of research denoted as the study of *therapist effects* (Wampold & Owen, 2021). Research on therapist effects has attempted to answer two related, but distinct questions: (1) How important is the person of the counselor or therapist to outcome? and (2) What are the attributes and specific behaviors that differentiate more effective from less effective therapists?

### **The Impact of the Therapist on Outcome**

Through the greater acceptance of multilevel statistical models, researchers have been able to attain better estimates of the specific contributions of the counselor or therapist to overall outcome (Wampold & Owen, 2021). Across a number of large samples of both clients and therapists, researchers have estimated that approximately 3-15% of the total variance in outcome can be attributed to specific therapist effects (Baldwin & Imel, 2013; Johns et al., 2019; Lutz et al., 2007; Lutz et al., 2015; Saxon & Barkham, 2012; Schiefele et al., 2017; Wampold, 2001; Wampold & Brown, 2005). Though this effect size range may seem modest, these estimates equal or exceed the effect sizes commonly associated with the implementation of specific theoretical models (Wampold & Owen, 2021). Furthermore, these seemingly modest effect sizes can have substantial effects on the outcomes of individual clients. As one example, Saxon and Barkham



(2012) found that the clients seen by the most effective therapists in their sample were almost twice as likely to have attained symptomatic recovery by the end of treatment compared to those clients seen by the least effective therapists.

Though research is still emerging on the complexity and nuances of therapist effects, researchers have found evidence that therapist effects might be moderated by two additional factors. First, therapist effects seem to be larger in studies involving clients seen in natural clinical settings as opposed to clients studied in random clinical trials (Baldwin & Imel, 2013; Lutz et al., 2007). In other words, the attributes and skills of individual therapists are more important in typical practice settings than in experimental studies in which there is a high level of therapist training, supervision, and experimenter control. Second, therapist effects seem to be larger when working with clients who are experiencing higher levels of distress or psychopathology (Barkham et al., 2017; Saxon & Barkham, 2012). Consequently, the person providing the service is even more critical when working with some of the most vulnerable and impaired client populations.

In understanding therapist effects, researchers have attempted to isolate the specific characteristics and behaviors that differentiate more effective from less effective helping professionals. These findings will be compared to hypothesized characteristics identified by authors in the counselor education literature. Several counselor educators have argued that effective counselors possess certain stable personality traits, such as openness, and that such traits should be considered as part of the admissions process to counselor education programs (Freeman et al., 2019; McCaughan & Hill, 2015). However, though somewhat counterintuitive, researchers have failed to identify any stable personality characteristics that have been consistently associated with counselor or therapist effectiveness (Beutler et al., 1994; Beutler et al., 2004; Wampold & Owen, 2021). Counselor educators have also suggested that counseling students who have

experienced personal counseling or psychotherapy will likely have an advantage in the helping process (Corey, 2012). Yet, prior participation in counseling or psychotherapy does not seem to differentiate more effective from less effective counselors (Beutler et al., 2004). Counselor educators have also identified emotional adjustment as an important attribute of an effective counselor (Pope & Kline, 1999). Some, though not all, research indicates that clinician well-being or psychological adjustment may be associated with better client outcomes (Beutler et al., 2004). However, assessing prospective or admitted counseling students for emotional distress or psychopathology may conflict with protections provided by the Americans with Disabilities Act (Freeman et al., 2019).

Counselor educators seem to be in near universal agreement that effective counselors have the capacity to create and sustain productive therapeutic relationships with a wide array of clients, an assumption that has been clearly supported by the empirical literature (Norcross & Lambert, 2019; Schöttke et al., 2017; Sommers-Flanagan, 2015). The challenge, though, is how to reliably identify prospective counseling students who are most likely to have the capacity to create such relationships. Researchers have found that interpersonal skills rated by applicants themselves or those casually observed during unstructured admission interviews are not predictive of success as a counselor or therapist (Wampold & Owen, 2021). However, recent research by Anderson and his colleagues (Anderson et al., 2009; Anderson, Crowley, et al., 2016; Anderson, McClintock, et al., 2016) suggests that a new conceptualization of interpersonal skills, which they denoted as *facilitative interpersonal skills*, may be useful for predicting subsequent clinical effectiveness with clients. Facilitative interpersonal skills refer to “a person’s ability to perceive, understand, and communicate a wide range of interpersonal messages, as well as a person’s ability to persuade others with personal problems to apply suggested solutions to their problems and abandon

maladaptive responses” (Anderson et al., 2009, p. 759). In their research studies, these skills have been operationally defined as ratings on the Facilitative Interpersonal Skills (FIS) Performance Task. In this performance task, therapists provide verbal responses to several challenging clinical situations presented by videotape. Therapists’ responses to these analogue clinical situations are then scored by trained raters on the following interpersonal skills: verbal fluency, emotional expression, persuasiveness, warmth/positive regard, hopefulness, empathy, alliance bond capacity, and problem focus. Therapists’ scores on the FIS Performance Task have been found to predict counseling outcomes with clients, both retroactively and prospectively (Anderson et al., 2009; Anderson, Crowley, et al., 2016; Anderson, McClintock, et al., 2016). In one of the most interesting studies in this area, Anderson, Crowley, et al. (2016) evaluated how well FIS ratings (high vs. low) and professional training in clinical psychology (yes vs. no) predicted the outcome of therapy. The therapists in this study included 11 graduate students enrolled in a clinical psychology program who had at least two years of training and 12 untrained doctoral students from programs on the same campus that did not involve any training in psychotherapy (e.g., biology, chemistry, communications). These researchers found that clients who worked with high FIS therapists—irrespective of graduate program enrollment—reported stronger therapeutic alliances and better outcomes than those clients seen by low FIS therapists. In other words, graduate students in unrelated disciplines who were high in FIS were more effective than clinical psychology students with lower levels of FIS skills. Based on all their cumulative research, Anderson, Finklestein, et al. (2020) recommended that admission committees consider applicants’ levels of facilitative interpersonal skills in selecting students for training programs.

## **Implications for Counselor Education Programs**

Based on the promising findings on facilitative interpersonal skills, counselors should evaluate the validity of the FIS Performance Task in predicting success in counselor education programs. For example, researchers might administer the FIS Performance Task to a new cohort of counseling students and then correlate these initial scores with students' subsequent performance in coursework, clinical placements, and on validated indices of client improvement. Another idea would be to evaluate the extent to which scores on the FIS Performance Task can be improved with instruction and practice. Anderson, Perlman, et al. (2020) recently investigated how well facilitative interpersonal skills could be taught to undergraduate students who had expressed an interest in a helping profession. While they found some evidence that FIS skills could be improved through observational learning and practice, the effect sizes associated with training outcomes were small, and it was unknown whether initial improvements in FIS skills would be maintained over time. Counselor educators might evaluate the malleability of these skills using counselor education students. The malleability, or lack thereof, of such skills would have important implications for counselor selection and training. If demonstrated to be valuable in counselor education programs, facilitative interpersonal skills may become an evidenced-based disposition that should be given serious consideration in both admissions and matriculation decisions.

While both theory and research support the importance of strong interpersonal skills in both selecting and training individuals to become professional counselors, a strong set of interpersonal skills is not the only dispositional characteristic needed for success as a graduate student and professional counselor. First, counseling programs accredited by CACREP require enrolled students to complete a challenging curriculum, and because of this, CACREP (2016) expects programs to admit students who have the aptitude for graduate-level coursework. Though

devalued by many counselor educators (Leverett-Main, 2004), traditional admissions criteria (i.e., undergraduate grade point averages, standardized test scores) have been found to consistently predict at least academic outcomes across several counselor education programs (Hatchett et al., 2017; Schmidt et al., 2009; Smaby et al., 2005). Individuals who have strong interpersonal skills—but who lack the aptitude for graduate level work—may be unable to complete a graduate degree from a CACREP-accredited program or pass requisite licensure exams. Second, counselor education programs need to identify counselor dispositions that are associated with high levels of ethical and professional conduct. Some of the most difficult challenges encountered by counselor education faculty involve neither weak interpersonal skills nor low cognitive aptitude but rather violations of ethical standards (McAdams et al., 2007). Consequently, counselor educators need to identify additional dispositions associated with professional conduct, and just as important, develop reliable and valid means of measuring these dispositions at admissions and throughout program enrollment.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Counselor educators have repeatedly advocated for an increased emphasis on non-academic dispositions in the selection and subsequent training of future counselors (Garner et al., 2020; McCaughan & Hill, 2015; Spurgeon et al., 2012). It is widely believed that non-academic dispositions are even more important than traditional indices of scholastic aptitude in counselor training and development (Leverett-Main, 2004). Furthermore, counseling programs accredited by CACREP are required to assess the dispositions of their students both at the time of admission and throughout their matriculation in their respective programs (CACREP, 2016). However, as this literature review has revealed, counselor educators are expected to discharge this responsibility in the absence of dispositional measures that reliably predict counselor performance. Currently, it is

unknown how counselor educators are discharging this responsibility, but it seems likely that counseling programs may be making important decisions about prospective and current students based on the results of dispositional measures or rating scales that have not been validated for reaching such decisions, practices that violate ethical standards.

How should counselor educators respond to accreditation standards for disposition assessment in the absence of proven tools for doing so? Until validated dispositional measures can be developed, counselor educators should avoid making high stakes decisions about either prospective or current counseling students based on the results of dispositional measures or rating scales that have not been validated to make such decisions. This recommendation is in line with standard E.9.B. from the American Counseling Association's (2014) *Code of Ethics*:

Counselors exercise caution when interpreting the results of instruments not having sufficient empirical data to support respondent results. The specific purposes for the use of such instruments are stated explicitly to the examinee. Counselors qualify any conclusions, diagnoses, or recommendations made that are based on assessments or instruments with questionable validity or reliability (p. 12).

This does not mean that counseling programs must simply forgo all dispositional assessment. What it does mean is that counseling programs should treat such data very cautiously and avoid making any strong inferences about prospective or current students based on unproven dispositional measures. Counselor education programs can continue to clearly delineate standards of professional and ethical *behavior* for students. These behavioral standards could be used as proxies for professional dispositions. In such cases, acceptance, remediation, or dismissal decisions would be based on concrete behavioral examples instead of references to what are often highly inferential

personality characteristics (e.g., self-awareness). The case of the dismissed student who filed a lawsuit against the counselor education program at College of William and Mary provides lessons for counselor educators on to how to define and manage violations of student performance standards (Foster & McAdams, 2009; McAdams et al., 2007).

As noted repeatedly by others (Garner et al., 2020; McCaughan & Hill, 2015; Spurgeon et al., 2012), counselor educators urgently need dispositional measures or rating scales that reliably measure counselor dispositions that predict success on important training outcomes. To move this research forward, three recommendations will be presented. First, counselor educators should make a greater effort to identify the dispositions and personal attributes of effective counselors based on performance with actual clients. So far, the identification of counselor dispositions has been limited to soliciting the expert opinions of those in the field. Not only has this strategy failed to produce validated measures of counselor dispositions, but expert opinions may be an ill-advised research strategy for identifying the characteristics or dispositions of effective counselors. A more valid research strategy might consist of identifying those characteristics that reliably distinguish more effective from less effective counselors in practice settings. As Anderson, Finkelstein, et al. (2020) noted, “researchers have only recently begun to take the next step of developing methods for isolating the therapist’s contributions to in-session psychotherapy processes and outcomes” (p. 484). Thus, there are many more research opportunities for identifying the dispositions or characteristics of effective counselors from the results of outcome research. Success with clients is a necessary, but not sufficient, criterion for attaining a graduate degree in counseling. Successful students will also need to meet other performance standards, such as success in academic coursework and a commitment to ethical standards. Therefore, as a second recommendation, counselor educators also need to identify additional dispositions associated with other indices of

success as a graduate student in counselor education. Third, counselor educators will need to develop measurement tools that can efficiently assess any validated counselor dispositions both during the process of program admissions and as a follow-up measure. While official transcripts and standardized test scores will be easy to attain, it will be much more difficult to reliably assess non-academic dispositional characteristics during a brief admissions interview. As Garner et al. (2020) pointed out, reliable ratings of inferential dispositions will likely require faculty training along with a commitment to meticulous assessment practices. These same challenges will also apply to dispositional measures that track student growth and performance throughout a matriculation period. Importantly, any measures of non-academic dispositions must meet the same psychometric standards expected for measures of academic ones (Nelson et al., 2003). This may be the strongest challenge to overcome.



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