Extending the Humanistic Vision: Toward a Humanities' Foundation for the Counseling Profession

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Abstract

Founding humanists argued that counseling should be ideologically grounded in the humanities. Currently, professional counseling culture is largely structured by scientific assumptions, which, the author maintains, have had a detrimental impact on the profession. Specific recommendations for shifting professional counseling culture to a humanities’ foundation are offered.
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The counseling profession has a fascinating history. Part of the allure of this history is the various, and often conflictual, accounts of the counseling process and human nature that have been proposed. From the Freudian view that people are basically sexual animals (Freud, 1905/1958), to the Rogerian vision of human strength and self-actualization (Rogers, 1951), to the computer programming models of the cognitive behaviorists (Beck, 1976), counselors have been witness to an awe inspiring parade of ideas about how to bring about human change.

One controversial theme that has run through these ideas is whether the counseling process should be fundamentally conceptualized as art or science (Hofmann & Weinberger, 2007). Orthodox behaviorists, for example, argued that counseling should be a strictly scientific enterprise (Skinner, 1974), while founding humanists, alternatively, proposed that counseling should be informed by the humanities, not the reductive forces of science (Maslow, 1968; Matson, 1971; Rogers, 1951). At this point in history, most practitioners would probably agree that the counseling process should be conceptualized along both artistic and scientific lines (Hofmann & Weinberger, 2007).

This ideological compromise is a functional and adaptive one for counselors to adopt. Arguably, counseling should be comprised of a mixture of relational intuition and scientific accountability. However, at a conceptual level, this compromise prevents each of the ideologies from reaching their full visionary potential, as the image offered by the humanities or arts is kept in check by science, and the scientific vision, likewise, is tamed by the humanities. As an analogy, mixing two colors might produce a visually appealing result. However, because the colors are mixed, the full aesthetic potential of each of the individual colors is lost.
Notably, though, ideologically pure, sweeping visions of counseling processes and the helping professions have occasionally been offered at various points in social science history. Watson's (1919) proposal that humans are blank slates upon which behaviorists could write, Skinner's (1976) vision of a utopia founded on the principles of learning, and existentialist conceptions of the importance of human freedom and subjective experience (May, Angel, Ellenberger, 1958) were arguably breakthrough attempts to articulate relatively pure visions of scientific and humanities' based counseling ideologies. The extraordinary insights gained from these visions were eventually critiqued and assimilated back into the diluted science/humanities ideological mixture.

During the past two decades, however, advocates for a scientific vision of counseling have, once again, begun to break out of this longstanding mixture and have articulated a vision of the helping professions as grounded in pure science, unencumbered by insights from the humanities. The empirical supported treatment (EST) movement (Task Force on Promotion and Dissemination of Psychological Procedures, 1995), best practices conceptualizations of counseling processes (Hansen, 2006c; McGowan, 2003), and the position that EST training should be a required part of educational curricula in the helping professions (e.g., Task Force on Promotion and Dissemination of Psychological Procedures, 1995), for instance, all draw from a vision of counseling that is akin to medicine or engineering, rather than literature or art. Notably, then, scientifically minded social scientists have not restricted their vision to the counseling process; they have advocated that multiple aspects of helping professions (i.e., treatment, education) be structured by the principles of science.

This scientific proposal has not gone unanswered by humanistic critics, who, not surprisingly, have derided the notion of a purely scientific profession as lacking the essential
human elements that counseling requires (Elkins, 2009). However, while they have critiqued the new scientific movements in counseling, humanists have generally not articulated a professional vision based on their own ideologies. Sweeping, new scientific proposals for changing the nature of the counseling profession arguably require more than occasional pokes and jabs from annoyed humanists. Instead, humanists must respond with a fully articulated vision of a profession grounded in the humanities.

Over half a century ago, the founders of humanism launched an ideological rebellion (Hansen, 2006b) against the scientific reductionism proffered by psychoanalysis and behaviorism by insisting that the humanities, not science, should form the ideological foundation of counseling practice (Fishman, 1999). Now that the architects of a scientific view of the helping professions have laid out their plans, it is time to resurrect the vision of the founding humanists to construct a counter proposal. The purpose of this article, then, is twofold: a) to explore the consequences of grounding the counseling profession in the humanities, such as literature, history, and philosophy, rather than science; and b) to demonstrate that this humanities' vision is a better fit for the profession than the scientific one.

**A Brief History of Science and Humanities' Influences in Counseling**

Freud invented the counseling situation during a period of high modernism, when rapid advances in a variety of fields were being made with the scientific method (Gay, 1988). A research neurologist by training, Freud idealized the scientific paradigm of controlled experimentation and objective observation (Gay, 1988). This paradigm served as a template for psychoanalytic treatment, which emphasized counselor neutrality, abstinence, and anonymity so that the verbalizations of the client would, theoretically, remain untainted by the psychology of the counselor (Gill, 1994).
Although Freud considered psychoanalysis a science, he was a well-read, aficionado of the humanities (Gay, 1988). Indeed, under Freud's vision, the ongoing development of psychoanalytic theory was strongly informed by the humanities. Theories of dream symbolism and the oedipal conflict, for example, drew from literature and mythology. Psychoanalytic theory, then, was built upon both a scientific and humanities foundation, despite Freud's insistence that psychoanalysis was a purely scientific enterprise (Gay, 1988).

In addition to psychoanalysis, behaviorism was becoming influential (at least in academic circles) during the early part of the twentieth century. Watson (1919) and Skinner (1974) were the primary architects of a purely scientific version of psychology that only concerned itself with observable behaviors. Behaviorists posited that all behaviors were due to learning (Skinner, 1974). By adjusting stimulus-response contingencies, undesirable behaviors could be unlearned. Behaviorists successfully applied this strict scientific vision to rats and pigeons. However, when behaviorists began to use their methods on people, the scientific purity of behaviorism began to crumble (Fancher, 1995).

When behaviorists switched from laboratory animals to human beings, the black box of messy subjectivity became an important variable to acknowledge in the treatment process (Fancher, 1995). Unlike the caged animals that they were used to manipulating, behaviorists soon discovered that experiential factors had an obvious influence on the people they were attempting to help. If behaviorists were to continue to operate in the clinical realm, they had to acknowledge client subjectivity. However, this acknowledgment would have threatened the scientific purity of behaviorism. A questionable compromise was struck by some behaviorists, who began to regard cognitions as behaviors, thereby acknowledging subjectivity while attempting to save scientific face (Fancher, 1995).
At the height of both the behavioral and psychoanalytic movements, a "third-force" (DeCarvalho, 1990, p. 22) orientation challenged the notion that counseling should be ideologically grounded in science. Founders of humanism (e.g., Maslow, 1968; Matson, 1971; Rogers, 1951) argued that counseling should be informed by the humanities, not the reductive, dehumanizing forces of science (Fishman, 1999). Specifically, humanism was inspired by a mixture of various philosophical movements, including phenomenology, which provided an emphasis on lived experience and subjectivity, and existentialism, which contributed the concepts of freedom, choice and the search for meaning to humanistic ideology (Fishman, 1999; Halling & Nill, 1995; Hansen, 2000).

Humanism provided a compelling humanities' based challenge to the scientific ideologies of psychoanalysis and behaviorism. Notably, however, Rogers, who was arguably the most influential humanist, consistently advocated for counseling outcome research (Elkins, 2009). Therefore, although humanism was founded on the humanities, it was quickly drawn into scientific ideology, at least for the purposes of verifying its effectiveness.

The science and humanities dialectic continues to be active in contemporary mental health culture. During the past twenty years, representatives from the science camp have advocated for a vision of counseling based on a medical model of prescriptive treatments for discrete categories of human distress (e.g., Task Force on Promotion and Dissemination of Psychological Procedures, 1995). Alternatively, during this same era, professionals aligned with the humanities side of the profession have proposed solution-focused (deShazer, 1985) and narrative counseling orientations (White & Epston, 1990), which were inspired by insights from postmodernist philosophy (Hansen, 2005b). However, the scientific vision has arguably achieved far greater expression and influence in contemporary counseling culture than its
humanities’ counterpart. The proliferation of research based treatment ideologies, contemporary demands for counseling to be focused on discrete symptoms, and the infiltration of reductive diagnostics and treatment planning into counseling curricula are all signs that a larger scientific vision of the profession is coming to fruition (Hansen, 2003). If humanists do not respond with their own professional vision, the humanities' element of counseling may remain hopelessly buried under the mechanistic image of the human condition proffered by science.

**A Humanities’ Vision for the Counseling Profession**

Arguably, the historical relationship between scientific and humanities' influences in the counseling profession can be characterized as a complex dialectical interplay, with each of the forces offsetting and progressively defining the other. A reasonable way to conceptualize the humanities' vision, then, is to identify key scientific ideological polarities and their humanities' counterparts. In this regard, two such polarities that inform a humanities' vision of the counseling profession are discussed: a) Human complexity vs. simplicity; and b) Multiplicity of perspectives vs. singular truth.

**Human Complexity vs. Simplicity**

It is a remarkable irony that contemporary counselor education tends to simplify, rather than complicate, human beings (Hansen, 2009). Students often enter graduate school in awe of the sheer complexity of the human condition. Sadly, by the time they order their caps and gowns, these new professionals have been educationally indoctrinated to think of people in relatively simple terms: as technique responsive clusters of symptoms. Of course, I am intentionally exaggerating the state of current counselor education to make my point, and there are certainly remnants of human complexity left in graduate curricula. Nevertheless, I do not believe that I am that far off the mark. Within counselor training programs, there is a strong,
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creeping trend toward simplifying the human condition (Hansen, 2009).

This simplification, I contend, is a direct result of the influence of scientific ideology. To illustrate this point, consider the scholarly goals of a humanist, such as a literary scholar, in contrast to the goals of a biologist, who is a dedicated scientist. The literary scholar may spend the better part of an academic career devoted to a particular author, novel, or even a single character. The goal of this humanities' professional is to complicate, dimensionalize, and enrich the subject matter, not simplify it. The biologist, in contrast, seeks to whittle down the subject of study to its barest elements by progressively eliminating extraneous perspectives that do not meet the instrumental needs of scientific advancement. Given their respective professional goals, the biologist and literary scholar have, indeed, selected the proper ideological tools to advance their disciplines.

Why, though, should the counseling profession adopt a humanities' ideology that complicates people rather than a scientific ideology that aims to simplify them? The brief answer (which is so plainly obvious it is remarkable that it is largely missed in contemporary counseling culture) is that people are, indeed, complex! To thoroughly adopt an ideology that is aimed at simplifying people is completely counter to everything that is known about the human condition. Of course, there are specific reasons that counselors should conceptualize their work more like literary scholars than biologists.

In terms of counseling, the locus of human complexity resides in the subjective meaning systems that people construct. An eloquent acknowledgment of this fact comes from Rogers (1980):

The only reality I can possibly know is the world as I perceive and experience it at this moment. The only reality you can possibly know is the world as you perceive and
experience it at this moment. And the only certainty is that those perceived realities are different. (Italics present in original text) (pg.102).

This undeniable truth that every human being has unique “inner subjective experiences” (Hansen, 2005a, p. 406) makes people extraordinarily complex.

Science, however, is the sworn ideological enemy of subjectivity. Scientists attempt to remove all subjective influences from their studies by using double-blind procedures and other methodological strategies to eliminate the influence of subjective bias. For scientists, subjectivity is something to be rooted out and methodologically eliminated so that the conclusions of their studies will be objective. Of course, this ideological stance is perfectly appropriate for chemists and physicists. Indeed, scientific investigation can also be an important tool in the humanities, as when chemical analysis is used to determine the age of historical documents. It is, likewise, vital for the counseling profession to use science as a tool, particularly to investigate the effectiveness of counseling interventions.

Although the counseling profession should absolutely retain science as a tool, the simplifying, anti-subjectivist ideology that gave rise to this tool should not be allowed to overtake the profession. Reductive diagnostics, symptom focused treatment planning, defining counselor education goals in terms of lists of competencies, techniques training, and manualized counseling models are just a few of the many signs that an emphasis on subjective meaning systems is gradually being lost in the profession. The creeping spread of scientific ideology, and concomitant loss of a humanities’ perspective, is arguably responsible for this shift. Indeed, it is extraordinarily ironic that professionals who seek to understand the unique experiences of their clients would adopt an ideology that is aimed at eliminating the variable of subjectivity!

The scientifically minded, however, may argue that simply because human beings are
complex, it does not necessarily follow that human complexity has to be acknowledged to help them. Indeed, if clients could be helped in simple, technical ways, which do not involve the complexities of subjectivity, this would certainly be more desirable than positioning the counseling profession within the exasperatingly complex realm of human meaning systems. Although this is a logical objection, there is no evidence to support the idea that clients are helped by conceptualizing their problems in simple, technical ways. Indeed, the opposite is true. In order to create an intimate helping relationship, which has consistently been proven to be the primary factor responsible for client outcomes (Wampold, 2001), counselors must honor, cultivate, and connect with the intricate webs of personal meaning that their clients present (Hansen, 2005a). Decades of counseling outcome research has suggested that techniques account for no more than one percent of the variance in counseling outcomes (Wampold, 2001).

Because attunement to subjectivity is integral to the type of help that counselors provide, the counseling profession should be founded upon a humanities’ ideology, which fosters human complexity, rather than a scientific ideology, which attempts to reduce phenomena to the simplest elements. Science, therefore, should be a tool that is used within an overall humanities’ approach to the profession, not the other way around. How, though, should a humanities vision, which encourages notions of human complexity, be revived within the counseling profession?

First, discussions of clients, in cases conferences, classrooms, and other forums, should emphasize subjective client meanings, not symptoms, family history of mental illness, reductive treatment plans, or other supposed objective case data. When discussing a client, the activity of counselors should bear a closer resemblance to English professors talking about a literary character than to chemists describing the properties of a particular compound. Of course, clients
are not fictional characters; they are real people who are in a state of psychological distress. Alleviating that distress, though, involves a humanities' style immersion into the realm of human complexity, not a simplifying, scientific objectification of the case material.

Second, qualitative research methodologies should be regularly taught and adopted by counselor education programs. Unlike quantitative research, which is aimed at finding singular, objective truths that are uncontaminated by subjectivity, qualitative methods are designed to illuminate the multiple strata of meaning that underlie human behavior (Berg, 2004). Quantitative research will always be a useful tool for counselors. However, a humanities’ vision for the profession is best served by investigative methods that explore subjectivity, not ones that eschew it.

Third, counselors should maintain a critical stance toward the medical model of counseling rather than uncritically participating in it. The complexities of human relating, which are integral to the counseling process, have been ideologically marginalized by the medical model of people as collections of symptoms to be eradicated (Barney, 1994; Chodoff, 2002; Hansen, 2007; Leifer, 2001). Despite its gross inconsistencies with the type of help that counselors provide, medical model training has been increasingly integrated into counselor education programs, and counselors have actively sought reimbursement from third parties that require the use of a medical model (Hansen, 2003). Whether or not a counselor decides to participate in the medical model is a personal, ethical decision. However, counselor education programs should prepare students to think critically about this model, so that it is not uncritically accepted once students become practitioners.

**Multiplicity of Perspectives vs. Singular Truth**

Consider philosophers as representatives of a humanities' profession. Critical inquiry,
active debates in the literature, and the consideration of multiple perspectives all contribute to enriching the philosophical body of knowledge. Philosophers do not expect that their debates will somehow march them forward to singular truth, with all philosophers one day coming to a unified agreement about philosophical topics. Instead, an ever increasing multiplicity of perspectives is the end product itself, not a means to some greater end.

Alternatively, consider a medical researcher as an example of a professional who operates within a scientific ideology. There may be differences of opinion among medical researchers about the cause of a particular disease. However, this multiplicity of perspectives is considered an unfortunate means to the greater end of finding the singular truth about what actually causes the disease.

The current intellectual climate of the counseling profession, I maintain, bears a much closer resemblance to scientific ideological assumptions, which regard multiple perspectives as a problem to be resolved, than it does to the intellectual stance of the humanities, which embraces multiple perspectives as an end in itself. As evidence for this assertion, witness the general lack of public debate over ideological positions among academic counselors (in both the counseling literature and academic settings). This is in stark contrast to the humanities, wherein active debate, both in literature and academic settings, is prized as a vital part of professional culture. Indeed, counselor educators have accepted oversight from an organization (i.e., Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Programs) that dictates the proper topics to teach and suitable perspectives to adopt. Widespread acceptance of this ideological police force is compelling evidence that counseling culture has become increasingly intolerant of multiple perspectives. This intolerance is not limited to academia, though.
Practicing counselors increasingly use standardized treatments for particular constellations of symptoms (Hansen, 2007). As a disturbing sign of this trend, treatment planning guides (e.g., Jongsma & Peterson, 2006), which detail precise, concrete treatments and goals for particular categories of clients, have proliferated in the past decade. This unfortunate development, which has been fortified at the academic level by the EST (Task Force on Promotion and Dissemination of Psychological Procedures, 1995) and best practices movements (Hansen, 2006c; McGowan, 2003), is as stifling to counselors as the demand to use only paint-by-numbers kits would be to artists. Furthermore, practicing counselors are not only told how to practice, but who to be. Those who promote a unified identity for the counseling profession have attempted to outline the proper identity for professional counselors to adopt (Gale & Austin, 2003). Counselors who wish to expand their horizons can make use of continuing education, but only, of course, if an accrediting body has approved the content of the continuing education experience (National Board for Certified Counselors, 2008). Nowadays, to become a counselor one must agree to don an ideological straitjacket.

Some might object, however, that professional advances necessarily entail a narrowing of perspectives. Astronomers, for instance, no longer endorse the idea that the earth is the center of the universe or that the gods are responsible for cosmic events. Likewise, perhaps the narrowing of perspectives is also a positive developmental step in the evolution of the counseling profession, not a regressive indication of ideological intolerance. This objection, however, is based on a completely mistaken understanding of the way in which ideological and clinical advances are made in the counseling profession.

Historically, advances in counseling have primarily been the result of creative visions, not scientific discoveries. Profound new ways of understanding people were offered by Freud
(1905/1958), Skinner (1974), Ellis (Ellis & Grieger, 1977), Rogers (1951), Perls (1969), and deShazer (1985), to name only a few examples. All of the novel, generative perspectives put forth by these theorists were born out of a combination of personal observation and creative imagination. Science was subsequently used, as a tool, to determine whether the application of a particular theoretical perspective had therapeutic efficacy. However, as in the humanities, the continual generation of multiple perspectives has always been the ideological engine that has driven the counseling profession forward.

Similarly, counseling practice is most effective when counselors are not dogmatically tied to single orientations but, rather, draw from multiple perspectives. Evidence from cross-cultural studies of healing (Frank & Frank, 1991), the multicultural literature (Sue & Sue, 2002), postmodernist conceptualizations of the counseling process (Hansen, 2006a), and counseling outcome research (Wampold, 2001) all converge on the conclusion that no one theoretical outlook is helpful to all clientele. Indeed, the ability of counselors to use a variety of meaning systems to help clients restory their lives in more adaptive ways is arguably a key element of the helping process (Hansen, 2006a). Multiple lines of evidence, then, clearly suggest that practicing counselors should adopt a humanities' mindset, which embraces multiple perspectives, not a scientific one, which strives for singular truth.

A humanities' stance of welcoming multiple perspectives is, therefore, vital for the advancement of the counseling profession at both the academic and practitioner levels. Arguably, though, the profession is currently saturated with scientific ideological assumptions, which emphasize singular truth. How, then, can the culture of counseling be changed so that multiple perspectives will be encouraged?

First, active debate should be promoted in academia and the counseling literature. One of
the best ways to foster an appreciation for multiple perspectives is for professionals who advocate different points of view to engage in civil, public debates (both in presentations and the literature) about their differences. A public airing of differences clarifies ideas, elucidates the nuances of systems of thought, challenges professionals to think in novel ways, generates new perspectives, and, perhaps most importantly, demonstrates that there are multiple, legitimate ways to understand the subject matter of counseling.

Second, and related to the first point, theoretical dogmatism should be discouraged at all levels of the counseling profession. Students should be taught that counseling consists of a variety of useful perspectives. No one perspective should be idealized or used for all purposes. Similarly, practicing counselors should view counseling orientations as problem solving tools, not representations of ultimate truths about human nature (Hansen, 2006a).

Third, continuing education should not be professionally mandated. As an analogy, imagine if authors of fiction were required to read a list of approved readings before they were allowed to write. If a humanities' atmosphere is to be created in counseling culture, practicing counselors, not bureaucrats, should determine the types of post-graduate educational experiences that suit their needs. It is a shocking assault on intellectual freedom and growth, for example, when only one article in an issue of a particular journal is officially sanctioned as eligible for continuing education credit, which, of course, implies that all other readings are somehow less intellectually worthy of professional attention. The need for continuing education should be an internalized ethic that is instilled in counseling students during graduate school, not an external mandate that limits and controls the types of educational experiences that counselors pursue.

Fourth, professional limitations should not be placed on counselor identity. Any proposal for a unified professional identity is, by definition, also a proposal that negates certain types of
identity possibilities (Hansen, 2010). Counselors should be encouraged to determine their own professional identities, which may be based on their personal temperament, local demands, orientation to their work, or any other considerations that they deem relevant to their professional life. Acceptance of multiple identities, rather than insistence on a unified identity, is an integral part of the freedom to become that has been rightfully prized by humanists.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

During the mid-20th century, when scientific orientations to counseling ruled the day, founding humanists argued that the counseling process should be ideologically grounded in the humanities, not the reductive forces of science (DeCarvalho, 1990; Fishman, 1999). Now that scientific ideals have gradually come to dominate the profession, the original vision of the founding humanists should be resurrected and applied to the entire profession, not just counseling processes.

Science is a vital tool that will always be a necessary component of counseling inquiry. However, the counseling profession should be ideologically grounded in the humanities, not science. The scientific ideals of parsimony, singular truth, and objectivity cannot possibly facilitate the evolution of a profession that historically has made its greatest advances by embracing complexity, multiple meaning systems, and creative visions of human nature.

I have made the following recommendations for shifting professional counseling culture from a position of simplicity and singular truth to one of complexity and multiple perspectives: a) Discussions of clients should emphasize subjective client meanings, not objective data; b) qualitative research should become a standard method of inquiry; c) the medical model should be subjected to more intense critical scrutiny; d) active debate over perspectives should be professionally encouraged; e) theoretical dogmatism should be discouraged; f) continuing
education requirements should be abolished or radically revised; and g) professional identity should be self-determined, not professionally mandated. Of course, there are other ways to encourage the spread of a humanities’ vision in the counseling profession (abolishing the infantilizing and draconian practice of mandated supervision, for instance). However, the seven recommendations listed above seem like a reasonable place to start. In keeping with a humanities’ vision, I sincerely hope that they will engender controversy and debate.

Ultimately, though, the professional divide between humanists and scientists may be a symptom of a larger existential conflict. In this regard, May (1979) argued that the essential human dilemma is a struggle between experiencing oneself as a willful subject, who is thoroughly engaged in the richness of life, as opposed to a determined object, who is helplessly buoyed about by the demands of living. The founding humanists were sensitive to this existential dichotomy and proposed that clients should be treated as subjects, not objects. Although this insight has often been applied to clients, counselors have been reluctant to treat themselves, as professionals, with the same regard. This, indeed, is a sad irony.
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