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How Do You Feel About The Counseling Profession?

by Virginia Anderson

(Honors English 1102)

We call him a counselor or psychologist, that person hiding behind a clip board and asking “How do you feel about that?” to a patient reclined on a couch retelling the woes of their childhood. But is this true? Is this what it means to be a counselor? And what is the difference between a counselor and a psychologist? With the increasing concern over mental health in America, not only are more people being seen by counselors and psychologists but more people are going to school for jobs relating to mental health. The profession of psychology is taking off as a career. According to the United States’ Bureau of Labor Statistics, the growth rate of employment for counselors and psychologists is between 22% and 37%, well above the 14% average (United States... “Psychologists” and United States... “Mental Health Counselors...”). I am going to explore what it means to be a counseling professional and how to become one.

I went to a counselor when I was younger at my mother’s behest. Lindsey De Los Santos was her name and, to my surprise, she was wonderful to talk to. There were no clipboards and she never asked, “How do you feel about that?” Being able to talk to a third party and getting someone else’s opinion on what was going on in my life was very therapeutic and insightful. The best way I can describe my counselor was that she was like a best friend. Lindsey was not allowed to tell anyone anything I told her, like how best friends keep secrets. She was a good listener, smart, and calm. This is what sparked my interest in professions that counsel patients.

To begin with, the two professions that primarily focus on counseling are counselors and counseling psychologists. Other professions such as psychiatry and clinical psychology offer counsel, but they also have an emphasis on medication since they deal with patients who have more severe mental health issues. Counselors and counseling psychologists are careers in psychology that focus on treating patients who have moderate issues that can mainly be resolved without medication and predominantly through talk therapy.

To fully understand the counseling profession, it is important to learn how it began. The first psychology laboratory was created in 1879 by a man named Wilhelm Wundt (Weiten 4). Wundt merged his two interests, philosophy and physiology, advocating for psychology as a new and independent science. While Wundt created his laboratory in Germany, the new science spread rapidly in the United States. Psychology took root in the United States when G. Stanley Hall established the first research laboratory for psychology at John Hopkins University in 1883 and the first coalition for psychology called the American Psychological Association (APA) (5).

Then in 1952, four separate associations came together in Los Angeles and formed the American Personnel and Guidance Association (APGA) with Robert H. Shaffer as the first president (Yep 65; Hodges 7). The first goal of the APGA was training and occupational counseling in high school and college settings (Hodges 7). By 1992, the APGA changed their name to the American Counseling Association (ACA) (*American Counseling*). The ACA dealt with many obstacles such as the lack of clarification on what it meant to counsel someone as a profession, the lack of credentials available for counselors, and the lack of academic programs explicitly aimed for counseling (Hodges 7). The popularity and credibility began to rise for counselors when accreditation for graduate programs was provided by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs (CACREP), and when certification was attainable by the National Board of Certified Counselors (NBCC). The CACREP is now a recognized organization authorized to certify master’s

degrees in many areas of specialty and certify a few doctoral programs, while the NBCC offers four main certifications to counselors (Hodges 8).

As the science of psychology grew, two fields of psychology emerged: applied and academic. Academic psychologists are more focused on researching to create new information or teaching in a school setting (Wegenek and Buskist 29). Applied psychology is “the branch of psychology concerned with every day, practical problems” (Weiten 12). The counseling profession falls under the field of applied psychology.

So what is the difference between a psychologist and a counselor? In order to hold the title “psychologist”, a doctorate degree of PhD, EdD, or PsyD has to be completed (Hodges 11). Counseling psychologists are equipped to administer psychological evaluations, make a diagnosis of mental disorders, and offer counseling. They are also able to conduct research and teach in their field (*Getting In* 42). Some of the ways counseling psychologists can conduct research are through observation, personality and interests tests, or interviews.

The clientele of counseling psychologists also help define this title. The book *Getting In: a Step-By-Step Plan for Gaining Admission to Graduate School in Psychology* is an APA published work and explains, “Counseling psychologists are oriented to life span issues such as career development and adjustment, marriage and family counseling, and a variety of issues encountered by most people during their life span” (42). Counseling psychologists are defined as working with clients who have less severe problems than the patients of other psychologists, such as clinical psychologists (Wegenek and Buskist 42).

Counseling psychologists can have work settings in health care institutions, hospitals, private practices, educational settings, and public mental health centers (*Getting In* 42). This is a major distinction for counseling psychologists in the field of psychology. In an internet survey of 5666 psychologists, supervised by State, Provincial and Territorial Psychological Association, “a greater portion of counseling psychologists reported working in counseling centers, while a greater portion of clinical psychologists reported working in medical settings” (Neimeyer et al. 43).

The mean annual wage for counseling, clinical and school psychologists is \$73,090 and the median annual wage is \$67,880 (“Occupational”). This is a very high paying profession because of its required amount of schooling. The job market widely varies for counseling psychologists as the highest mean annual wage for professionals in New Jersey can be \$96,200, yet in New Mexico, where the highest concentration of jobs are, the annual mean wage is \$65,020. Though the amount of money earned for being a counseling psychologist varies from state to state, counseling psychology has had a steady job market throughout the years (Wegenek and Buskist 30).

Generally, the term “counselor” refers to a graduate who has completed a master’s degree in a counseling specialty, unlike the doctorate required of a psychologist (Hodges 4). Counselors, like counseling psychologists, also provide aid to clients who have stress, depression, addiction, and many other afflictions that can hinder their ability to function properly with everyday life. Counselors work in very similar settings as counseling psychologists, such as academic settings and mental health centers, but their roles are restricted to only offering counsel.

The mean salaries for counselors depend on the setting in which they work. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics outlines the annual mean salaries for counselors working in secondary and elementary schools to be \$53,750 and counselors working in junior or community colleges to be \$48,240 (Hodges 14).

Why would someone choose this profession? A counseling professional has the privilege of being a motivating factor in someone’s road to recovery and that must feel rewarding. Counselors and counseling psychologists get to help patients and see them progress. While there are rewarding benefits for this profession, there are also some characteristics that are good indicators of whether this profession would be a rewarding choice for a student. A few characteristics are being open minded, maintaining a positive attitude, and the ability to be empathetic (Collision 17). It is

important for a counseling professional to be open minded because working with clients of different cultures and backgrounds are part of the job description. It is not allowed to dictate your client's decisions, so being open minded to different opinions is an advantage. If clients are coming to be advised and guided, it is important that a counseling professional has a positive outlook on the future. Having a negative outlook on life will not foster healing or aid in coping with issues. The ability to be empathetic is also important because a counseling professional wants to comfort their patient and create an environment that makes discussion appealing.

Becoming a counseling psychologist or counselor takes a certain amount of schooling. The schooling to become a counselor and counseling psychologist have similarities and differences. For both counseling psychologists and counselors, the first step is to complete an undergraduate degree at a university. Graduating with a BS or BA in a degree like sociology or psychology is not mandatory for graduate programs, although it is beneficial (Hodges 5).

The next step is to be accepted into a graduate program and complete it (Hodges 5). There are many different graduate programs and they vary by university. Counselors will want to look for graduate programs that are accredited by the CACREP and pick a program that is in a specialty area. Some specialty areas for counselors are rehabilitation counseling, marriage and family counseling, and clinical mental health counseling (4). For counseling psychologists, a doctorate program accredited by the APA is desirable (*Getting In 53*).

Since counselors generally receive a master's degree, an important concept to know is that graduate programs offer master's degrees or terminal master's degrees (*Getting In 52*). A terminal master's degree program only awards a master's degree which means classes will not carry over to a doctorate degree and will require a separate application, acceptance and graduate processes from a doctoral program. There are other programs that are nonterminal that give master's degrees as a part of their doctorate degree. This is important to note for students making the decision to pursue a master's or doctorate degree. If a master's degree is the ultimate goal, than a terminal master's degree program would be a good choice. If a student is pursuing a doctorate degree or unsure of which one they would like to pursue, a nonterminal master's degree program may be a better choice.

Master's degrees and doctorate degrees have advantages and disadvantages. Doctorate degrees take a larger investment of time and money from a student than a master's degree (*Getting In 53*). However, professionals with doctorate degrees normally get paid more than those with master's degrees and ensure the education requirements for licensure in all states. When determining whether one should acquire a doctorate or master's degree, there is no bad choice.

The book *Getting In: A Step-By-Step Plan For Gaining Admission To Graduate School in Psychology* also gives great guidelines on how to get into a doctoral program. It recommends that students get as much research involvement as they can (54). Since psychology is a science, being able to conduct research to test hypotheses and create theories is vital. Another tip this book has is to build good relationships with teachers so they can later write you letters of recommendation and give advice. Other tips are more general like get good grades and have a firm handle on a wide set of introductory subjects. The last tip for students is to get as many experiences in the specialty you wish to pursue as possible. For counseling, an example could be volunteering for a Big Brothers Big Sisters program to help mentor a child in a local community. These tips come straight from the APA and are very informative as well as useful.

After graduation, the following step is to get a job that allows you to work under supervision, and, lastly, obtain licensure (Hodges 5). Licensure is what allows a graduate to collect private payment for private practice, bill insurance companies, and practice counseling (9). Counseling psychologists and counselors obtain licensure so that they can work without being monitored and so they can advertise themselves as counseling psychologists or counselors (*Getting In 56*). Licensure laws vary from state to state in the education required and the amount of supervised counseling needed to obtain them. The actions allowed by a profession are also defined by licensure.

To receive licensure, counseling psychologists have to pass a state board exam, which varies by state, and two years of supervised practice to be eligible for the exam. The APA is the organization that has provided licensure for psychologists. Similarly, counselors also have to pass an exam to receive licensure and the main exam, though there are many, is the National Counselor Examination which is administered by the NBCC (Hodges 27). It is important that students check their state's licensing laws and finish the required supervised practice required. Once the test is passed, a counselor or counseling psychologist is allowed to practice.

The APA has had more success in reaching a national commonality for licensure than the ACA which is still facing difficulties. The reason for this is mostly because of the many different organizations at work for counseling licensure. Both the CACREP and NBCC have been a part of creating licensure for counselors as well as the Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification and others.

Once a student becomes a practicing counselor or counseling psychologist, it is important to be a part of a professional organization. Shannon Hodges, a former director of counseling programs, in her book *101 Careers in Counseling*, urges professionals to obtain a membership with a professional organization saying, "A lack of professional membership indicates less investment in the profession and that sends the wrong signal to the hiring committee or interviewer" (27). Professional organizations publish informative and often new information on a career field and promote positive changes in the career field. They contribute to a sense of community to a profession.

There are many organizations available to professionals. For a professional whose job is to counsel, the ACA would be best association to be a part of. In addition to the ACA, there are counseling associations for almost every state, too. Membership costs for the ACA are discounted at a \$93 membership for students and an average membership fee is \$163 for professionals (*American Counseling*). They offer benefits such as health insurance, liability insurance, and discounts on car rental companies (*American Counseling*). The ACA also has an annual conference, which was on March 20th to the 24th in Cincinnati, Ohio, of this year (*American Counseling*).

There are some definite issues that are still lurking for the counseling profession. The main one being counselor identity, according to the ACA (Mascari and Webber 15). Counselors and counseling psychologists fear that their profession is going to lose its sense of identity and they want separation from each other. Psychologists have skills in research and training to conduct experiments that a counselor does not have. On the other hand, counselors have many different types of counseling that have emerged such as art therapy, dance therapy, music therapy, and adventure therapy (Hodges X). Adventure therapy, for example, seems to be the latest trend of intervention for mental health treatment of children (Tucker 155). Despite the differences, counselors and counseling psychologists study the science of psychology, take many of the same courses and learn much of the same information. It is because both counseling psychologists and counselors provide almost identical care and have similar education and training requirements that I doubt they will ever reach the degree of distinction they wish to have from one another.

The field of psychology is one of the newest sciences today. Though it may be a young field, it is very relevant in America. In the article "Policymakers Focus on School and Mental Health Proposals In wake of Shooting" published in *Counseling Today*, a publication of the American Counseling Association, authors Scott Barstow and Art Terrazas write about the relation between counselors and current events. This article addresses some proposals that President Obama introduced in January of 2013 in response to the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. His proposals are to regulate gun control, promote mental health treatment, and to combat the stigma mental health treatment carries. The American Counseling Association is in full support of the proposals as they believe "it should be as easy to obtain mental health treatment as it is to obtain a gun" (Barstow and Terrazas 9). President Obama's proposals suggest many courses of action such as initiating programs to hire staff for schools and police departments that are certified to administer

mental health treatment. Other suggestions are purchasing more school safety equipment and generating emergency management plans called EMPs for schools. Millions of dollars would also be administered in the form of grants and programs to help young people with anxiety, substance abuse, trauma and general mental health concerns. President Obama's proposals are not the only course of action that is being taken to better the availability of mental health treatment; a Senate committee had a hearing for the first time in seven years about the mental health system in America on January 24, 2013. This information is exciting because it directly relates to the expertise that counselors and counseling psychologists have. Clearly, President Obama understands the importance of mental health issues and our country is becoming more aware of the need for psychological professionals.

The counseling profession is a very relevant occupation and is growing. Counselors and counseling psychologists are the professionals who are interested in helping people with everyday problems and they offer relief to their clients from their sufferings. The need for counselors and counseling psychologists is only increasing and it is a rewarding profession that anyone would be proud to practice.

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