

[Editorial]

Counseling Training in Hong Kong: Challenges and Possibilities

S. Alvin Leung

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

This article outlined major issues and challenges confronting the counseling profession in Hong Kong resulting from a rapid increase in counseling-related training programs in recent years. In order to maintain the healthy development of the counseling discipline, the professional community needs to put a stronger emphasis on assuming its “gate-keeping” function. There is a need to define more clearly what constitute “professional counseling,” and what credentials are needed for one to become a “professional counselor.” Some possible steps that counseling training programs and the professional community could take to strengthen counseling training and practice in Hong Kong are identified and discussed.

The search for professional identity has been a major theme in the development of counseling in Hong Kong in the past two decades (Leung, 1999). Counseling is practiced by a range of mental health and educational professionals, including but not limited to social workers, psychologists, and teachers. Even though many helping and mental health professionals recognized the importance of counseling, there were relatively few stand-alone formal training programs in counseling in the 1990s. Counseling was treated as an “adjunct” training component in many academic and professional programs in social work, psychology, and education offered by local tertiary education institutions.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to S. Alvin Leung, Department of Educational Psychology, Faculty of Education, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Sha Tin, N.T., Hong Kong. E-mail: smleung@cuhk.edu.hk

However, in the past few years, there have been significant changes in the landscape of counseling training in Hong Kong. Many tertiary institutions are offering training programs in counseling. For example, during the 2003–2004 academic year, The University of Hong Kong (Department of Social Work and Social Administration, Master of Social Science in Counselling), Hong Kong Baptist University (School of Continuing Education, in collaboration with University of South Australia, Master of Social Science in Counselling), Hong Kong Polytechnic University (Department of Applied Social Sciences, Master of Arts in School Guidance and Counselling), The Chinese University of Hong Kong (Faculty of Education, Master of Arts in School Guidance and Counselling) are offering postgraduate training programs related to counseling. Other programs that are under planning to be offered in the near future are programs at the City University of Hong Kong (Department of Applied Social Studies, Master of Social Sciences in Counselling) and Hong Kong Shue Yan College (Department of Counselling and Psychology, conversion of a diploma program into an undergraduate degree program in counseling and psychology). As could be seen above, most counseling training programs in Hong Kong are at the postgraduate level leading to a master degree with a specialization in counseling (please note that the above is not an exhaustive list of counseling-related programs in Hong Kong). Most of these programs target working professionals who want to improve their knowledge and skills in counseling.

One could say that this is an exciting time for counseling training in Hong Kong. Indeed, it is a positive development as counseling is being more widely recognized within the professional and academic community, and that many helping professionals, such as teachers, social workers, nurses, and university student affairs personnel, are seeking counseling training in their professional journeys. It is an opportunity for counseling, as a unique professional and academic discipline, to develop a stronger

sense of identity in Hong Kong. It is also an opportunity for various academic training programs in counseling to utilize their respective strengths in specialized areas within counseling to develop theories, research, and models of training that are consistent with the needs of diverse individuals in Chinese communities (Leung, 2003).

However, the rapid expansion in counseling training in Hong Kong has also uncovered a number of important issues that have long-term implications to the development of the counseling profession. In order for the counseling profession to grow in a healthy direction, these issues have to be dealt with by members of the counseling community collaboratively. I am writing this article with two major purposes in mind. First, I would like to identify several key issues and challenges confronting the counseling profession at a period of expansion in counseling-related training programs. Second, I would like to offer some suggestions on what could be done by the counseling professional community so that through collaborative efforts, we could move the counseling discipline forward positively and constructively.

Realities and Challenges

The increase in counseling-related training is a challenge and an opportunity for the counseling profession to grow. I would like to mention three major challenges in this article. First, most counseling-related training programs are using a self-funded model because government support for postgraduate training in Hong Kong is shrinking. One of the realities of a self-funded model is that programs have to admit a sizable number of students in order to maintain their financial feasibility. In order to keep tuition fee at an affordable level, counseling training programs have to admit an increasing number of students in each cohort. However, since counseling training often involves intensive experiential learning and close supervision, a small student-to-teacher ratio is often regarded

as a necessary condition for learning to occur (e.g., the recommended student-to-full-time-faculty ratio is 10:1, according to Counsel for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2001). The challenge to counseling training programs is to strike a balance between quality and quantity. They need to maintain quality of instruction when the size of classes are larger than ideal, and to create opportunities for student-teacher contact when the number of students per teacher/supervisor might discourage intensive contacts between teachers and learners.

Second, with more training programs established, a sizable number of graduates will be produced annually. Each year, students (perhaps in the hundreds) who have completed a master-level training program in counseling would be looking for opportunities to fulfill their career aspiration to practice counseling in a more “professional” capacity, either through their current employment positions or other career channels. On the positive side, training in counseling could enrich the professionalism of these graduates as they utilize their counseling training to work with individuals and groups they serve. Through that, the public will become more aware of the unique contribution that the counseling profession could bring to individuals and the society. However, there is also a danger that some graduates, under the illusion that they are “professional counselors,” might not have adequate awareness of their professional limitations, and practice in ways that they are not prepared for (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2003). Related to this concern are a number of critical questions that the counseling profession in Hong Kong has to answer. For example, does graduation from a master-level training program in counseling qualifies a person to adopt the title of “professional counselor?” What populations and concerns are master-level counselors trained to work with? What are their limitations in terms of professional competence? With the increasing number of counseling graduates, is there a system in place to monitor the professional behavior of counseling practitioners to ensure ethical

practice? These are important questions to answer as more counselors are trained, and as the public becomes more aware of the existence of the counseling profession.

A third issue related to counseling training is training curriculum. As the counseling profession matures, the profession needs to examine its position on whether there should be a set of core training components that trainees should be exposed to in the training process, in order to ensure that they acquire the necessary fundamentals in terms of theories and skills. This is not to suggest that a uniform program of training should be developed and adopted by various training institutions. The development of diverse training programs in counseling targeting specific populations or treatment areas is important because it would enhance the impact and social relevance of the counseling profession. The question is whether there should be a core curriculum, covering domains related to theories, practice, and research. For example, in the United States, there is a mechanism to accredit counseling training programs by the CACREP. CACREP (2001) requires that accredited programs adopt a core curriculum, including courses related to professional identity, social and cultural diversity, human growth and development, career development, helping relationships, group work, assessment, and research and program evaluation. In addition, there are also requirements in terms of supervised practicum and internship, as well as the size and credential of faculty members in charge of delivering the program (CACREP, 2001). It is not suggested in here that a similar system be adopted, but that the counseling profession needs to decide whether there should be specific training standards to ensure coverage of core materials/experience in terms of theory, skills, practice, and supervision.

Recommendations on Counseling Training

Counseling training programs play a key role in the development of

the counseling discipline in Hong Kong because their graduates today will one day become core of the profession in the future. It is important for training programs to play the role of gatekeeper, in ensuring that those who enter the profession have the foundation knowledge and skills to help clients that they serve in their career roles. I would like to make the following recommendations.

First, it is vital for counseling training programs to select the right person to receive such training. Trainee selection is a first step in the “gate-keeping” role of training programs. A central belief related to trainee selection is that not all individuals are suitable for training in counseling, and so training programs should screen applicants in terms of suitability for the profession (American Counseling Association [ACA], 1995; Corey et al., 2003). It is equally important for applicants to be informed of the selection criteria used by training programs (ACA, 1995). At the present moment, there is definitely pressure to fill up admission quotas given that most training programs are operated under a self-financed mode. If training programs admit students who are not suitable for the profession, the public will lose confidence of the graduates they produce. Careful selection of trainees will, in the long run, ensure the healthy development of the counseling profession.

Second, counseling training programs should structure its training program in ways that would accomplish its training goals. I would like to recommend that training programs consider a healthy balance between training in awareness, knowledge, and skills (CACREP, 2001; Corey et al., 2003). Given that counseling is an applied discipline, counseling training should not focus exclusively on theory without opportunities to practice. On the other hand, training programs emphasizing skills and practice without sufficient attention devoted to theories and knowledge would reduce counseling practice to a mixture of intervention techniques that are not grounded in theory and empirical research. Equally important

is the personal growth and professional development of the counselor, because helping professionals who are aware of their needs and intentions, and who are committed to their growth and development, are most likely to positively impact individuals they serve (Corey & Corey, 2003). The emphasis on awareness, knowledge, and skills has been used in cross-cultural counseling training models (e.g., Sue, 2001), and I think this training model could be applied to generic counseling training in Hong Kong as well.

Third, supervised practicum experience should be a central training component (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998; CACREP, 2001; Holloway, 1995). Practicum is an opportunity for counseling trainees to integrate theory with practice, to transfer what they have learned in the classroom in a realistic and formal counseling setting, with guidance and support from a counseling supervisor. Without adequate supervision, the amount of learning occurring in the practicum process might be limited. In the context of supervised practicum, trainees could review their counseling cases, to identify their strengths as well as areas that they could improve, and to modify or implement new intervention strategies with clients. Counseling supervision is designed to be an interpersonal process to enhance the effectiveness of counselors and to facilitate their professional growth and development. In addition, supervision also provides opportunities for counseling training programs to closely observe the skills and development of trainees, thus allowing them to collect information on the suitability of trainees for entry into the profession. It is imperative for counseling training programs in Hong Kong to pay special attention to the development of a strong supervised practicum component to ensure the quality of training. There needs to be adequate resources (e.g., employment of supervisors) devoted to ensure that students participate in practicum experience and receive adequate supervision of this learning experience (National Board for Certified Counselors, 1999). Meanwhile, evaluation standards should be developed to assess the quality of

supervised practicum experience (e.g., evaluation tools, requirements in terms of client contact and supervision hours).

Fourth, ethical guidelines of counseling should be infused into different theoretical and applied training components, so that trainees are adequately prepared to practice in an ethical manner in today's complex society (Corey et al., 2003; Kwan, 2003a). Regardless of the size of a counseling training program, ethical practice should be emphasized. However, as the number of trainees increases, there will be more counselors practicing "professional" counseling in different settings, and a greater likelihood that the unethical behavior of a few might tarnish the public image of the profession. Teaching ethical guidelines alone will not ensure ethical practice, but a stronger dose of instruction would more adequately prepare trainees to face various ethical dilemmas in the real world.

Fifth, counseling training programs should strengthen its academic program in ways that would further the development of the counseling profession not just in terms of training, but in terms of the empirical and scholarly base that the discipline is based on (Chwalisz, 2003). The long-term development of the counseling profession depends on whether the scholarly base of the profession could establish its roots in Hong Kong as well as in its surrounding Chinese communities. The scholarly base of counseling in Chinese regions should not only include the literature in the Western world, but also encompass theories, research, and practice that are indigenous to Chinese regions (e.g., Yang, 1996). Developing indigenous theories and practices is a long-term goal of the counseling discipline in Chinese regions (Leung, 2003), but it should start with academic training programs in counseling. For example, counseling-related research projects could be integrated into training programs in counseling, and students' research projects could be coordinated in ways to explore related research questions or themes. Faculty members could involve students in their own research programs, so that students could be mentored to become scientist-practitioners.

Recommendations to the Counseling Professional Community

The rapid development of counseling training in Hong Kong deserves the attention of the counseling profession, especially the professional organization representing counseling practice (i.e., Hong Kong Professional Counselling Association, HKPCA). Counseling training should be synchronized with the development of the counseling profession, especially in terms of the societal demand for individuals with counseling training, and the professional identity of counseling in relation to other helping professionals. In order to increase the recognition of counseling as a helping discipline capable of making positive contributions to the society, the entire counseling profession needs to develop consensus on what constitutes professional counseling, and what qualifications, training, and credentials are needed for someone to become a “professional counselor.” The many students who will be graduating from various training programs will be practicing counseling in different settings and capacities, and the public will demand an answer to these questions. It is an urgent task for the counseling profession to come up with answers in ways that the public could understand and accept. With the above in mind, I have several recommendations.

First, the counseling profession should consider setting up a system of certification or registration, based on formal academic training (e.g., academic credentials) and post-training practice experience (e.g., post-degree supervised practice) of counselors. According to Sweeney (1995), credentialing in the counseling profession could be done via three different approaches, which are registration, certification, and licensure. Registration is simply “a voluntary listing of individuals who use a title or provide a service” (Corey et al., 2003, p. 308). It is designed to be a minimal form of regulating professional practice in counseling. Certification is “a voluntary attempt by a group to promote a professional identity” (Corey et al., 2003, p. 308), and certification is granted only if an individual fulfill a set of minimal standards (usually in terms of

education, training, and/or examination test scores) established by the certification organization. A certification system is often initiated and monitored by an organization representing the profession. Meanwhile, licensure is a credentialing system that is backed by licensure acts of a regional government. Through legislative regulations, standards of practice and pathways to enter the profession are defined and monitored.

Given that the development of counseling in Hong Kong is still at a beginning stage, perhaps a system of registration or certification would be most suitable. Such a system could be developed and monitored by HKPCA. Counseling professionals could work together to define the qualifications necessary for someone to become a “professional counselor.” Then a registration or certification system could be developed such that minimal requirements in terms of education, training, and experience could be used to regulate entrance to the profession. Such a system would allow the profession to regulate itself and to fulfill its “gate-keeping” function. As the counseling profession matures, the registration/certification system could slowly evolve into a licensure system backed by legislative acts, at a time when the advantages of a counselor licensure system become more apparent to counseling professionals and the general public they serve.

Second, the counseling professionals should work together to develop standards of training on professional counseling. The purpose of developing standards is not to discourage theoretical diversity or to advocate a specific model of training. Rather, standards are developed to ensure that fundamental and core elements are included in the training process. Training standards could be in the form of the inclusion of core academic subjects, such as those specified by CACREP (2001) or National Board for Certified Counselors (Guilbert & Clawson, 2001) in the United States. Training standards could also be in the form of the inclusion of specific supervised-practice requirement, such as specifying the required number of practicum and supervision hours in a professional training

program. Developing training standards requires dialogue among training programs and among members of the professional counseling community. Even though counseling programs in Hong Kong are somewhat competitors as they seek to attract promising students, in order to facilitate the long-term development of the counseling profession, there should be more dialogues and collaborations. The development of common views regarding training standards might be an important first step.

Third, the counseling profession should make a stronger effort to promote ethical counseling practice among counseling professionals (Corey et al., 2003; Kwan, 2003a). Ethical counseling practice is important regardless of the size of the professional community, but when there is a rapid increase in counselors joining the professional community, it becomes even more important. The current position among scholars and practitioners is that ethical counseling practice is a life-long learning task for counselors, involving development in awareness, knowledge, and the use of a decision-making process in which ethical guidelines and considerations are applied in actual practice (e.g., Pope & Vasquez, 1998). The counseling professional organization (i.e., HKPCA) should be in the forefront to spearhead this effort, including conducting survey to examine the status of ethical practice, to review if current standards are sufficient in terms of scope and coverage, to develop a mechanism to monitor and review complaints, and to educate professionals and the public on relevant issues related to ethical counseling guidelines. All the above actions are important for the public to develop a positive image toward the counseling profession.

Fourth, the counseling profession needs to educate the public on what is counseling, what and how counselors could help, and what rights do clients have as consumers and recipients of service (Kwan, 2003b). Individuals who have completed training in counseling will seek to apply their knowledge and skills in different settings, including traditional

settings such as in social service agencies, secondary and primary schools, as well as non-traditional settings such as in private practice in the community. When the public has a keen knowledge about counseling and what this profession could offer, they will be able to choose the kind of service that they need and be satisfied.

Conclusion

The rapid increase in opportunities to receive training in counseling in Hong Kong is a matter deserving the attention of the counseling profession. In order to maintain the healthy development of counseling as a viable academic and helping discipline now and into the future, there needs to be tighter control over who receives training and who is qualified to call oneself a “professional counselor.” Both counseling training programs and the professional counseling association (i.e., HKPCA) have a major responsibility in assuming the “gate-keeping” function of the profession. Counseling professionals and academic programs should seize this opportunity to work together and chart the future development of the profession, to establish standards and directions in terms of training, practice, and research. Instead of working in isolation on their own, counseling professionals, including practitioners, researchers, and trainers, could make a bigger difference through their collaborative efforts.

References

- American Counseling Association. (1995). *Code of ethics and standards of practice*. Alexandria, VA: Author.
- Bernard, J. M., & Goodyear, R. K. (1998). *Fundamentals of clinical supervision* (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Counsel for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. (2001). *CACREP accreditation standards and procedure manual*. Alexandria, VA: Author.
- Chwalisz, K. (2003). Evidence-based practice: A framework for twenty-first-

- century scientist-practitioner training. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 31(5), 497–528.
- Corey, G., Corey, M. S., & Callanan, P. (2003). *Issues and ethics in the helping professions* (6th ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Corey, M. S., & Corey, G. (2003). *Becoming a helper* (4th ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Guilbert, D. E., & Clawson, T. W. (Eds.). (2001). *Preparation guide for the National Counselor Examination for Licensure and Certification (NEC)*. Greensboro, NC: National Board for Certified Counselors.
- Holloway, E. (1995). *Clinical supervision: A systems approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kwan, K. K. L. (Ed.). (2003a). Ethical practice of counseling in Asia [Special issue]. *Asian Journal of Counselling*, 10(1).
- Kwan, K. K. L. (2003b). The ethical practice of counseling: What clients in Asia ought to know about counseling. *Asian Journal of Counselling*, 10(1), 127–133.
- Leung, S. A. (1999). The development of counselling in Hong Kong: Searching for professional identity. *Asian Journal of Counselling*, 6(2), 77–95.
- Leung, S. A. (2003). A journey worth traveling: Globalization of counseling psychology. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 31(4), 412–419.
- National Board for Certified Counselors. (1999). *NBCC standards for the ethical practice of clinical supervision*. Greensboro, NC: Author.
- Pope, K. S., & Vasquez, M. J. T. (1998). *Ethics in psychotherapy and counseling: A practical guide* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Sue, D. W. (2001). Multidimensional facets of cultural competence. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 29(6), 790–821.
- Sweeney, T. J. (1995). Accreditation, credentialing, professionalization: The role of specialties. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 74(2), 117–125.
- Yang, K. S. (1996). The psychological transformation of the Chinese people as a result of societal modernization. In M. H. Bond (Ed.), *Handbook of Chinese psychology* (pp. 479–498). Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.

香港的輔導培訓：挑戰與機遇

在本港，近年與輔導相關的培訓課程數目迅速增加。本文概述在這種情況下，本港輔導專業所面對的主要問題及挑戰。為了維持輔導界的健康發展，輔導專業社群必須加強其把關的功能，清楚界定何謂「專業輔導」，並釐定「專業輔導員」必要的資歷。本文亦會建議一些強化輔導培訓及實踐的方法，讓輔導培訓課程及輔導專業社群參考。