

# COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY: A LOOK AT THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY, ROLES, AND THE FUTURE

ADA L. SINACORE-GUINN *McGill University*

**ABSTRACT.** This paper examines the questions, "What is counselling psychology?" and "Where is it going?" In an attempt to answer the first question, it examines the identity, roles, and values of the counselling psychologist. Second, it provides an analysis of some of the current trends in counselling psychology from the perspective of those roles, values, and identity. Finally, it analyzes the profession's *raison d'être* and concludes that it is the focus on strengths and wellness that will give counselling psychology an edge in understanding the educational, social and political issues that individuals and society are struggling to address.

**RÉSUMÉ.** Cet article traite de deux questions: "Qu'est-ce que la psychologie-conseil?" et "Où va la psychologie-conseil?" Tentant tout d'abord de répondre à la première question, l'auteur examine l'identité, les rôles et les valeurs du psychologue-conseil. Elle analyse ensuite certaines tendances actuelles de la psychologie-conseil sous le rapport des ces rôles et valeurs et de cette identité. Enfin, elle analyse la *raison d'être* de la profession et en vient à la conclusion que c'est en mettant l'accent sur les atouts et le bien-être que la psychologie-conseil se révélera la discipline la plus apte à comprendre les questions éducationnelles, sociales et politiques auxquelles les individus et la société sont confrontés.

What is counselling psychology?" and "Where is it going?" are questions which have moved to the forefront of the profession in recent years. They are questions taking on a particular urgency and importance at the present time when (a) the whole subject of health care, how it is structured, and how it is to be financed is being challenged and reviewed, and (b) educational institutions are cutting budgets and assessing the role and efficacy of counselling services. Counselling psychologists are increasingly being questioned as to where they are to fit in this new world order and, in some cases, their traditional areas of expertise and practice are prizes being sought by other types of mental health professionals.

In the face of these challenges, some have called for counselling psychologists to return to their "roots" as a way of asserting their unique identity and value (Sprinthall, 1988, 1990) while others have predicted the demise of the profession through its merger with clinical psychology (Fitzgerald & Osipow, 1986; Smith, 1982; Watkins, 1983, 1985). Implicitly or explicitly present in both of these positions is the assertion that counselling psychologists have lost or are losing their identity within the present environment. This assertion is deserving of the most serious consideration and challenge. Moreover, it is the position of this paper that an understanding of the existent identity of counselling psychology lends strong direction to the second question of where the profession is or should be going.

#### WHAT IS COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY?

A great deal has been written about the profession of counselling psychology from a historical perspective (e.g., Super, 1955; Watkins, 1986; Whitely, 1984). Commonly identified roots of counselling psychology are: (a) the vocational guidance movement founded by Frank Parsons; (b) the mental hygiene movement founded by Clifford Beers; (c) the psychometric movement and the study of individual differences stimulated by Alfred Binet; (d) the development of counselling and psychotherapy from a nonmedical and nonpsychoanalytic perspective stimulated by Carl Rogers; and (e) the social and economic forces and development which have had an affect on the profession. These include the personal and career problems faced by a large number of veterans after World War II, an influx of students into higher education due to the G.I. Bill in the United States, the growth in the size and status of the American Psychological Association (APA), an increase in the understanding and acceptance of individuals who seek psychological services, and the recognition of the necessity of a scientific basis for professional status (Whitely, 1984).

By the end of World War II these historical sources and influences merged to provide the foreground of a unique discipline which was to become counselling psychology as we know it today (Whitely, 1984). The unification of these sources was confirmed as early as 1952 when a report issued by the APA asserted that the "professional goal of the counselling psychologist is to foster the psychological development of the individual" (cited in Whitely, 1984, p.175). What is crucial here is that in this early APA report, and throughout the development of the profession, emphasis has been placed upon "foster[ing] psychological

development" rather than treating "illnesses" and in working with individuals within the "normal" range of development and life situations, such as those related to career, family, and education. This twofold identification with the "normal" has been one of the major forces in defining and shaping the identity of counselling psychology.

One current definition of counselling psychology offered by Gelso and Fretz (1992), in line with this historical lineage and accepted on a preliminary basis in this paper, is that counselling psychology is "a specialty that focuses on research, assessment, and interventions on and with relatively intact personalities, i.e., people who are usually not severely disturbed and might be considered in the 'normal range', but who want psychological assistance of one type or another" (p. 10). As will be seen, this definition provides a solid basis for counselling psychology to "name itself" and its experience so as to claim its own identity.

#### *The counselling psychologist identity*

Just as women, ethnic minorities, and other marginalized groups have fought to maintain their identity, while at the same time fighting to be given the same rights and privileges as the majority, counselling psychologists have struggled in the shadow of clinical psychology and psychiatry. This struggle has been put forth in numerous articles (i.e., Fitzgerald & Osipow, 1986; Smith, 1982; Thomas, 1991; Watkins, 1983). Clinical psychology and psychiatry are deeply embedded in the medical model with a focus on symptoms, diagnosis, and illness, while, as will be discussed in more detail later on, counselling psychology is interested in education, remediation, and development (Gelso & Fretz, 1992; Watkins, 1983). Counselling psychologists react against the medical model with its focus on psychopathology, yet at the same time, licensure, third-party payments, and other necessities of the profession are based on being versed in and applying the medical model. This results in counselling psychologists having the experience of being second class citizens in the medical world as exemplified by their fight for admitting privileges, prescription privileges, and the right to provide services in a wide range of settings.

While there are strong arguments in favor of counselling psychologists deserving the same rights and privileges as clinical psychologists, these arguments for equal treatment in one mental health setting must not be allowed to define the profession. Equal treatment does not entail or require identity as though the two professions are thereby the same.

The crucial distinction rests upon counselling psychology's focus upon "normal" development and individual strengths, even in the hospital setting.

This focus on normal development is not a hollow distinction. It has provided counselling psychologists with a unique value system. George Howard (1992, pp. 423-424) identifies fourteen values of the counselling psychologist. The list is as follows:

1. Respect for the individual is desirable.
2. Diversity (by gender, race, religion, culture, sexual orientation, etc.) is good.
3. Good interpersonal relationships are important.
4. A satisfactory and productive career is desirable.
5. Growth and development (rather than pathology and remediation) are often preferred conceptual lenses for viewing human problems.
6. A scientist-practitioner orientation can lead to both good science and good practice.
7. Counselling psychologists can intervene in lots of settings/methods and ways.
8. Counselling psychologists emphasize increasing a client's ability to solve problems, make decisions, and cope more effectively with life's major stressors and daily demands.
9. Counselling psychologists foster an awareness of oppression/societal barriers to self-actualization and free choices.
10. Personality and psychopathology are strongly influenced by environmental factors.
11. Counselling psychologists advocate an altruistic rather than an entrepreneurial approach to their work (i.e., the public good is more important than personal gain).
12. Open-mindedness, methodological diversity, and theoretical ecumenism are important intellectual skills.
13. Prevention is preferable to dealing with existing problems.
14. A holistic approach to mind-body-environment issues is encouraged.

Embodied within this list of values one can identify some basic tenants of the counselling psychology identity. First, the counselling psychologist is interested in working with people who struggle with a wide range

of problems that are often termed developmental or transitional. Thus, the focus is on individuals with a "normal range of life problems" (Gelso & Fretz, 1992, p. 6). This lends itself to a focus on people's assets or strengths even when working with individuals who are severely disturbed.

Second, the counselling psychologist gives particular attention to the person-environment interaction with an understanding of the challenges of individuals from marginalized groups versus an intrapsychic focus that puts the attention on something inherently wrong inside of the person.

Third, the counselling psychologist reacts against the notion of psychopathology and of labeling individuals (Talley, 1995). Counselling psychologists are trained to look beyond diagnostic labels (Sinacore-Guinn, 1995) and are taught to contextualize individuals' difficulties, assessing the socio-cultural aspects of those difficulties versus labeling the individual as being disturbed.

Forth, counselling psychologists emphasize brief interventions. Gelso and Fretz (1992) suggest this is approximately 12 to 15 sessions. Although counselling psychologists provide individual counselling and psychotherapy this is not the only type of intervention for which they have the skills. For example, they may participate in activities such as guidance, supervision, consultation, research, administration, and training.

Finally, counselling psychologists are primarily concerned with assisting individuals to have more rewarding careers, interpersonal relationships, and a sense of personal growth. Counselling psychologists have particular expertise when it come to career development and workplace concerns.

Thus, a close examination of the aforementioned identity and values leads this author to the following, admittedly limited, working definition: the counselling psychologist is interested in research and practice that focuses on individual lifespan development with particular attention to the interaction with sociocultural factors that either enhance or inhibit that development. Within this focus the counselling psychologist is interested in facilitating individuals' growth and development through prevention and remediation with attention being given to educational, vocational, and interpersonal satisfaction. Thus, the counselling psychologist is interested in enhancing and providing for "positive" human experiences.

### *Roles and functions of the counselling psychologist*

In 1968 Jordaan, Myers, Layton, and Morgan defined the roles of the counselling psychologist in three major areas: (a) *remedial*: this entails working with individuals or groups in order to assist them in remedying problems of one kind or another. The kind of interventions used here may be personal or social counselling at an individual, group, couples, or family level. Other interventions may be crisis intervention or various therapeutic services; (b) *preventive*: counselling psychologists “anticipate, circumvent, and forestall difficulties that may arise in the future” (Jordaan et al., 1968, p. 1); and (c) *educative and developmental*: counselling psychologists “help individuals plan, obtain, and derive maximum benefits from the kinds of experiences which will enable them to discover and develop their potentials” (Jordaan et al., 1968, p. 1), and, as suggested by Gelso and Fretz (1992), teaching skills or enhancing attitudes that better equip individuals to deal with everyday life problems.

These roles and functions are consistent with the values of counselling psychologists (Howard, 1992) and still resonate with the members of the profession today (Fretz & Simon, 1992; Myers, 1982). Moreover, although these roles are discussed as if they are three distinct entities, in reality they are intimately intertwined and one can not easily separate remediation from prevention or prevention from development. The counselling psychologist must skillfully interweave these roles to facilitate the client’s growth and development.

### *Where do counselling psychologists work?*

The unique identity, values, and roles of counselling psychologists lend themselves to a wide variety of work settings. Historically, counselling psychologists worked in college and university settings, business and industry, and government agencies. A trend that started in the late 70s and has continued on through the 80s and into the 90s is the increase in the diversity of settings in which the counselling psychologist works (Fitzgerald & Osipow, 1986; Zimpfer, 1993). Thus, research has indicated that counselling psychologists have moved well beyond their historical roots into settings such as independent practice, community health centers, general hospitals, mental hospitals, outpatient clinics, and medical schools (Watkins, Lopez, Campbell, & Himmel, 1986, as cited in Gelso & Fretz, 1992; Zimpfer, 1993).

This growth has been justified in a number of ways. Some have argued that counselling psychologists are better equipped than other mental health professionals to work in a broad range of settings due to the multiplicity of tools that they have on hand (Meara, 1990). Others have argued that counselling psychology's move into traditional mental health settings provides the opportunity to make counselling psychology's contribution to mental health more visible and better understood (Myers, 1982). In response to and in support of this trend, one of the recommendations of the *Next Decade Project* (Division 17, APA), was that "[t]raining programs in counselling psychology should recognize that some of their graduates will work in settings designated as mental health delivery systems and should orient their students accordingly" (Myers, 1982).

Does this expansion into mental health work settings suggest that counselling psychology is moving away from its roots? Sprinthall (1990) suggests that the move to more clinical settings which are embedded in a medical model may "eliminate both our uniqueness and independent professional identity." Again this struggle parallels that of women and ethnic minorities. Can a woman work in a traditionally male occupation and do it as a woman would, or must she learn to be like a man? Just as women are changing the structure of the workplace (Russell, 1994) counselling psychologists' entry into medical settings can change the structure of those settings. For example, the most powerful way to deconstruct the medical model is from within. Remediation, prevention, education, and development happen across a wide variety of settings. Those counselling psychologists who choose to work in more medically oriented settings can and undoubtedly are offering those clients an alternative form of treatment based upon the orientation and values of counselling psychology.

Of course, it cannot be denied that as is the case with any minority operating within a larger dominant society, there will be pressures upon the counselling psychologist to conform to the model of the dominant society. The only way to resist this pressure is through a strong sense of self-identity. It is through training programs that the professional identity of counselling students must support the development of a strong sense of the "counselling psychology self" so that counselling psychologists choosing to enter medical settings have the power to maintain their identity within those settings.

Another concern related to the broadening of work settings arises out of the fact that counselling psychology programs are often housed in faculties (colleges) of education. Some college administrators have raised some concern about the fact that many of the graduates of these programs are not working in traditional educational settings. The concern here appears to be that such a change in work settings reflects a movement away from the educational focus of these institutions. As it happens, counselling psychology is, in this context, exhibiting and promoting an enhanced and expansive vision of education. Education is a lifelong developmental process which happens in a wide variety of settings. As previously stated, counselling psychologists claim an educational and developmental role as a basic part of their role and identity, both of which are consistent with the mission of colleges of education. Thus, as counselling psychologists increase the number of work settings in which they are employed, they are expanding the role of education beyond traditional educational institutions. Indeed, counselling psychologists can be identified as pioneers in the field of education.

#### *Scientist-practitioner model*

Starting with the Greyston Conference in 1964 up through the Atlanta Conference in 1987 (Gelso & Fretz, 1992; Sprinthall, 1990) the training model endorsed by counselling psychologists is the scientist-practitioner model. Gelso and Fretz (1992) define the scientist-practitioner model as "a model of training requiring that professionals master both the helping, practitioner roles and the methods of investigative science" (p. 44). Thus, counselling psychologists are trained to be able to read, analyze, critique, and carry out research.

This balance of scientist and practitioner is not only important for academicians who choose to do research but for those individuals who are interested in the practice of psychology as well. One must be able to critique research in order to integrate it into practice. A solid ability to do research provides this capacity. As well, practitioners may be interested in expanding the scientific knowledge of the field through participating in research and publication. Indeed, because counselling psychology is an applied psychology, academicians and practitioners ideally should work together in order to develop the broad base of scholarship that lends itself to practical applications for the field to continue to move forward.



## CURRENT TRENDS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

There has been and continues to be a great deal of discussion in the literature and at professional conferences about the current trends of the profession in the areas of research, training, and practice (Fretz & Simon, 1992; Howard, 1992; Sprinthall, 1990). Within this discussion, there are many concerns and conflicts about how counselling psychology should position itself in order to remain a distinct profession (e.g., Fitzgerald & Osipow, 1986; Smith, 1982; Watkins, 1994). The crucial questions are: "How has the profession grown?" and "Within that growth, how can it remain a unique profession?" The trends identified hereinafter, though obviously not exhaustive, are chosen to illustrate how the identity of counselling psychology can serve as a guide towards finding an appropriate developmental direction for the profession in answering those questions.

### *Commitment to diversity*

Counselling psychologists' commitment to understanding "normal" development and their focus on the person-environment interaction makes them uniquely qualified to examine how individuals' race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and disability, etc., affect their development. Through the rejection of intrapsychic approaches, resistance to labeling psychopathology, and an emphasis placed on clients addressing daily issues in order to live productive lives, counselling psychologists have moved away from traditional theoretical approaches which gave little time or recognition to gender, sexual orientation, race, and socio-economic status. Traditional psychology has found and continues to find pathological the ways in which these groups experience the world (Sinacore-Guinn, 1995). Thus, as Sprinthall (1990) suggests, "in dealing with ethnic minority groups or women, if the problem is (as is usually the case) racism or sexism [or a combination of both] then the counselling psychologist takes on the causes and does not treat the symptoms" (p.461). This statement is consistent with the values that "counselling psychologists foster an awareness of oppression/societal barriers to self-actualization and free choice" (Howard, 1992, p.424) and "diversity (by gender, race, religion, culture, sexual orientation, etc.) is good" (Howard, 1992, p.423). Counselling psychologists are the most qualified to carry through on Sprinthall's sug-

gestion because of their value system and their focus on normal development and person-environment interactions.

Counselling psychologists "cannot divorce themselves from the 'real world'" (Talley, 1995). As the world shrinks and international change affects individual development, counselling psychologists need to be attuned to the needs of "special populations". Counselling psychology programs across North America have come to see courses on multiculturalism, gender, and current social trends as fundamental to training. It is this foresight and commitment that will lead counselling psychologists into their future and will cement their unique role in the larger world of psychology.

### *Career psychology*

One could argue that career psychology is one of the "roots" of counselling psychology and, ironically, it is here that the call to reclaim our roots has surprising resonance and importance. "Training programs in counselling psychology should rediscover the importance of work (and workplace) as an influence on human well-being and seek to stimulate student interest in the psychological aspects of work" (Myers, 1982). This call to counselling psychology is of even greater import today. Workplace issues are at the forefront of the national agendas of both Canada and the United States. Policies on sexual harassment, racial bias, family leave (to name only of few) are being considered and addressed. As the population ages, concern is also rising about the practical and psychological issues related to preretirement and retirement. As the economic situation of both countries becomes more constrained, and companies lay-off individuals in ever increasing numbers, an awareness of midlife career transition and workforce re-entry is necessary.

The area of career psychology has expanded well beyond the conventional theories of career planning and vocational choice to address the changing workforce. Thus, counselling psychology must address the concerns of women's construction of the workplace, discrimination in the work environment, unemployment, retirement, sexual and verbal harassment, enfranchising the unskilled and untrained, improving working conditions, obtaining equity in salaries, helping people pursue the development of their work potential, addressing the special needs of people with disabilities, and dealing with ageism, racism, and any other number of "isms" which occur in the work environment.

While counselling psychology is uniquely qualified to meet these changes in the work environment and their related career issues, the sheer magnitude of these issues in terms of numbers of individuals involved and the speed of change is a significant challenge to the profession.

### **Research**

Researchers in counselling psychology are increasingly utilizing qualitative and ethnographic methodologies in addition to the still common quantitative techniques. Consistent with the profession's valuing "open-mindedness, methodological diversity, and theoretical ecumenism" and the desire to "foster an awareness of oppression/ societal barriers to self-actualize and free choices" (Howard 1992, p. 424), this shift towards the use of more diverse research methodologies represents an effort to contextualize difficulties and seek to understand trends and themes that arise out of certain situations or frameworks.

Historically counselling psychology research has relied upon quantitative methodologies. While these methodologies have served the profession well in its efforts to understand certain general psychological themes and processes, it cannot be denied that part of the use of these methodologies was an effort, common to many social sciences, to scientifically legitimize the profession by paralleling the methodologies of the natural sciences. Yet, although many of the questions that counselling psychologists are interested in can be answered by quantitative methodologies, such methods are not the only legitimate nor necessarily the best methods to address many of these questions. In particular, the profession's focus on the person-environment interaction with its attention to diversity strongly lends itself to qualitative analysis. The use of a variety of research methodologies, combined with the profession's customary scientific rigor, can only help to enhance counselling psychologists' ability to continue to develop the theoretical and epistemological knowledge which will maintain the profession as a unique discipline.

### **Social responsibility**

Over the course of the 80s and into the 90s psychology's role in affecting legislation has increased significantly. Psychology's focus has moved away from legitimizing the profession to contributing to the public good (Fretz & Simon, 1992). Counselling psychology has been in the forefront of addressing legislative and public policy issues. Fretz and Simon (1992) suggest that "counselling psychologists with an

emphasis on developing human potential, are well poised to spearhead efforts to use psychological knowledge in improving social welfare" (p. 31).

As governments begin to scrutinize and revamp health care and current economic realities are leading to massive budget cuts in the areas of health care and education, counselling psychologists must continue and enhance their efforts to develop strategies and become a part of the decisions that will greatly alter the profession. However, beyond the professional concerns that directly affect the practice of psychology, counselling psychology's traditional valuing of and advocacy for "an altruistic rather than an entrepreneurial approach to their work (i.e., the public good is more important than personal gain)", demands that they interest themselves in political and social issues that address the clientele whom they serve. In a shrinking world where acts of terrorism, infanticide, child and sexual abuse, and genocide (to name a few) are issues at the forefront of the international agenda, counselling psychologists are going to be called upon to provide their expertise in facilitating the survival of the countless individuals subjected to these life atrocities. Counselling psychologists cannot put their collective "heads in the sand." They must advance to the front line of addressing these issues. Not only will this provide counselling psychologists the opportunity to address these important concerns, it will solidify its place in the profession of psychology.

### *Assessment*

The role of assessment in the counselling process has received a significant increase in attention in the past 10 to 15 years (Watkins, 1994). Further, numerous articles and books have been written on the topic of assessment; major assessment instruments have been revised and new ones developed (Watkins, 1994). The ways in which counselling psychology can and has integrated assessment into its portfolio is significant.

Talley (1995) suggests that "assessment [should be] looked upon as an evolving procedure rather than a static one-time procedure, and 'testing' is [to be] viewed as only one means of understanding a person's abilities or personality structure" (p. 9). This distinction between assessment and testing is a critical distinction. First, assessment is not just "testing". Assessment does not provide one with an answer but a starting point by which a process can begin, an approach consistent with counselling psychology's developmental versus symptom orientation. Second, assessment is far broader than just the administration of

a test and, therefore, takes on many forms, such as, observations, case studies, and interviews. This breadth of view is demanded by counselling psychology's awareness of the importance of the person-environmental interaction. Finally, in respect to its understanding of diversity, regardless of the form taken, assessment procedures under the counselling psychologist's control need to be sensitive to and have differential norms for specific populations (Sinacore-Guinn, 1995; Talley, 1995). These notions about assessment are unique to counselling psychology and "may lead us to a much more informed, holistic view about assessment and counselling and how they can be most meaningfully integrated into our practice and training efforts" (Watkins, 1994, p.321).

### *Training*

The committee of the *Next Decade Project* (Myers, 1982) put forth eight recommendations with regard to the training of counselling psychologists. It asserted that training programs must: (1) rediscover and assert the importance of work and the workplace on human well-being; (2) orient students toward the possibility of working in mental health delivery systems; (3) address the social efficacy of mental health delivery systems; (4) educate students both to the value and limitations of individual counselling and psychotherapy; (5) foster collaboration with the various providers of mental health services; (6) advocate the assessment of competence within the profession; (7) support the standards of the scientist-practitioner model; and (8) attend to the issue of diversity. In many ways those recommendations demonstrated great foresight into where the profession was headed and now has arrived. At the same time, even a cursory review of those recommendations in the light of current events reveals the need to continue to reaffirm them in contemporary training programs.

In addition to these recommendations, due to the increasing challenges leveled against the professional identities of counselling psychologists one must add a training recommendation that provision be made to assist students in the development of a strong sense of their "counselling psychology self-identity" and the values of the profession. As students increasingly move into nontraditional mental health settings their ability to maintain the values of counselling psychology and affect change in the mental health profession will depend in part upon the strength of their own self-identity. Such settings have been shown to challenge or weaken counselling psychologists' self-identification (Watkins, 1983). In order to confront this and, at the same time better

prepare them for the range of appropriate interventions which may be required of them, students must be trained to recognize both the particular difficulties faced by the diverse groups in society and equally they must be provided with the skills necessary to intervene. These interventions should be aimed at both clients and the larger systems where students will work which may not be attuned to these issues. As the context and roles of counselling psychology broaden students must be given the skills to bring forth that context and stand by it in times of stress and even ridicule.

### CONCLUSION

Counselling psychology as a discipline and profession serves an important role in the broader discipline of psychology. Many social, political, and economic forces have been placed on the profession and as a result the profession has had to address its *raison d'être* (Talley, 1995). It is with great certainty and pride that the conclusion is that counselling psychology has a strong and necessary role as well as a specific and unique identity. As a profession it has a methodology, a body of knowledge, and contributes in very specific ways to the understanding of human behavior. The basic tenets, values, and identity of counselling psychology provide a focus and orientation that is much needed to counter the obsessive focus on what is wrong with individuals that more medically oriented approaches provide. Counselling psychology instead questions what is right with the individual and problematic with the environment. It asks what kind of intervention is necessary for the person-environment interaction to be more productive and satisfying? It is this focus on strengths and wellness that gives counselling psychology an edge in understanding the social and political issues that individuals and society are struggling to address.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am grateful to Roger Myers, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus at Teachers College, Columbia University, for his mentoring which facilitated the development of my identity as a counselling psychologist.

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**ADA L. SINACORE-GUINN** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology at McGill University. She received her PhD in Counselling Psychology from Columbia University in New York City.

**ADA L. SINACORE-GUINN** est professeur adjoint au département de psychopédagogie et counseling de l'Université McGill. Elle est titulaire d'un doctorat en psychologie-conseil de l'Université Columbia de New York.