The Synonymic Nature of Professional Counseling and Humanism: Presuppositions That Guide Our Identities

LINWOOD G. VEREEN, NICOLE R. HILL, GLORIA AQUINO SOSA, AND VICTORIA KRESS

The authors present the argument that professional counseling is philosophically grounded in humanism. As evidence, 5 major presuppositions of professional counseling—relationality, development, empowerment, wellness, and social justice—are situated as fundamental to the understanding of humanism. These tenets are presented as a foundation to ground professional counselor identity as humanistic, and thus position humanism as synonymic with professional counseling.

Keywords: humanism, humanistic, professional counseling

Historically, scholars and theorists have positioned the humanistic philosophy as the third force of counseling, situated between behaviorism and multicultural counseling. However, humanism can arguably be best understood as a metaparadigmatic framework that guides the identity and the enactment of the professional values of counselors. The synonymic nature of professional counseling and humanism emerges from the emphasis counselors place on relationality, development, empowerment, wellness, and social justice. These five tenets of professional counseling ground our professional identity in humanism and provide the foundation for presuppositions that guide our work as counselors. Across this article, the aforementioned five presuppositions will be presented to elucidate how humanism is a metaparadigm that is synonymous with the values of professional counseling.

Essential to a professional counseling identity is the value of relationships, a developmental perspective of growth and change, a holistic wellness paradigm, and a commitment to client empowerment through social justice (Carney, 2007; Chung & Bemak, 2012; Day-Vines & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Myers & Sweeney, 2005; Perepiczka & Scholl, 2012; Seccombe, 2002).

Linwood G. Vereen and Nicole R. Hill, Counseling and Human Services, Syracuse University; Gloria Aquino Sosa, Graduate Counseling Program, Saint Mary’s College of California at Moraga; Victoria Kress, School of Counseling and Social Science, Walden University. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Linwood G. Vereen, Counseling and Human Services, Syracuse University, 805 South Crouse, Lower Level, Syracuse, NY 13244 (e-mail: lgvereen@syr.edu).

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Therefore, professional counselors can be seen as nurturers of relationships, wellness, development, and social justice, and as contributing to the foundational aspects of the existence that emerges through the enactment of humanism. Humanism has often been presented as a way of being (Rogers, 1961) and as a way of becoming—or evolving—into one’s ideal self. At its core, professional counseling is grounded in a humanistic paradigm. While introducing us to the I and thou, Buber (1970) extrapolated the difference in personal attitude toward the individual versus an object. In doing so, he revealed a fundamental value of professional counseling: a foundational attitude toward individuals as a relation between, and to things as a connection with objects. According to Buber, these attitudes represent the basic twofold situation of human life, in which the relation to thou knows no bounds, whereas a relation to it or to object has bounds.

From a professional counseling viewpoint, a comprehensive understanding of human behavior involves consideration of growth and developmental transitions. According to Vontress (1996), people, including professional counselors, are trying to make sense of life and in this quest develop a philosophy of existence. Within the philosophy of the professional counselor, the ideal is to assist the client in making meaning of existence in the context of growth and developmental transitions. The counseling profession’s emphasis on human growth and development is demonstrated through action, education and training, and scholarship. In terms of action, professional counselors view growth and development as a normative process in which each individual engages via social, contextual, and ecological environments, which are grounded in culture, history, and experience; these aspects relate to, and provide the rationale for, social justice as an important aspect of both humanism and counseling.

Professional counseling is grounded in two critical tenets of humanism: the individual is always in a fluid state of development, and the awareness that we as humans cannot be reduced to a series of parts (M. E. Lemberger, personal communication, February 28, 2014). A value of relationships, client empowerment, a holistic wellness perspective, and social justice expand the two critical tenets to more fully capture the ways in which the values of professional counseling parallel those of humanistic philosophy. These constructs underlie the five presuppositions that showcase the synonymic nature of humanism and counseling.

Presupposition I: Professional counseling and humanism both value relationships as the defining feature of holism, therapeutic encounters, and conceptualization of clients. Honoring authentic relationships is inextricably connected to the core of humanism and professional counseling.

The process of counseling is inherently humanistic in that it focuses on the relationship between the personhood of the counselor and the client.
From a humanistic stance, people cannot be understood from a reductionist framework, but rather, they are best conceptualized from a holistic paradigm that honors the interrelationships among all facets of their personhood (Greening, 2006; Young, 2013). Counseling prioritizes the process of becoming for the client, as well as for the counselor, via the therapeutic encounter between them (Scholl, McGowan, & Hansen, 2012; Tyron & Winograd, 2011; Yalom, 2005). There is an emphasis on authentic encounters requiring the counselor to be in relationship with oneself as well as in relationship with the client (Yalom, 2005).

The authentic encounter foundational to the process of counseling is centrally situated within the humanistic paradigm. The valuing of relationships extends to recognize the role of systemic dynamics and their interplay within and between clients, counselors, and their contexts (Hansen, 2006). Hansen (2009) described the “multiple self-systems” (p. 187) of clients in which multiple contexts and realities exist. Professional counseling recognizes the emergence of systemic dynamics and the critical role they play in shaping and affecting our realities. The self is best understood in relation to our internal parts and external contexts and systems.

Multiple research studies and meta-analyses have evidenced that the therapeutic alliance is positively correlated with efficacy regardless of the theoretical orientation and service delivery modality (Norcross, Krebs, & Prochaska, 2011). With more than 50 years of research, the therapeutic alliance continues to be highly correlated with counseling treatment outcomes across all theoretical treatment approaches (i.e., humanistic, psychodynamic, behavioral, cognitive-behavioral, humanistic) and modalities (i.e., group, individual, couple, family; Norcross et al., 2011). A therapeutic alliance is strengthened by a humanistic foundation, or one in which an active, warm climate of collaboration is fostered, mutually agreeable counseling goals are established, and consensus is achieved on the goals and course of treatment (Bordin, 1979).

Presupposition II: Professional counseling and humanism are rooted in a developmental model of growth that prioritizes growth at the individual, family, group, and community levels.

According to the ACA Code of Ethics (American Counseling Association, 2014), professional counselors are to encourage the growth and development of their clients (Standard A.1.a.). Professional counselors promote a developmental focus and ascribe many client problems to normal developmental milestones and transitions (Kaplan, 2002). A developmental focus depicts the individual as a dynamic and fluid organism. The humanistic orientation of professional counseling points to people’s natural inclinations toward growth and health (Perepiczka & Scholl, 2012). Such perspectives are hopeful and do not consider individual problems or concerns to be permanent; instead, counselors consider change and growth to be ever
occurring, always possible, and fluid. Inherent in humanistic counseling is the belief and understanding that people have the capacity to move forward, change, adapt, heal, and attain optimal mental health or wellness (Brady-Amoon, 2012). One might argue that, from a developmental outlook, the focus of observation is actually on change and attempts to understand the processes of adaptation over time in an evolving and ever-changing context.

The developmental perspective of professional counseling is intertwined with a humanistic focus in that an emphasis on the normalization of human reactions and experiences is key. Furthermore, a de-emphasis of a pathology-saturated focus may provide clients with a greater sense of resiliency and strength, which may lead to a greater belief in their efficacy and motivation to make life changes (Carney, 2007). Theoretically, an individual’s sense of empowerment may be enhanced by the process of framing problems in a developmental context, reinforcing the idea that the client-perceived “problem” can and will change, and emphasizing that clients can facilitate this change. From a developmental perspective, professional counselors are preventative and place an emphasis on the development of coping skills while simultaneously developing the ability to proactively prevent new problems from occurring.

The humanistic values of growth and development, empowerment, and prevention have been interwoven with the discourse of professional counseling since its inception. Most historians trace the origins of professional counseling as a unique vocation to the work of Jesse B. Davis and Frank Parsons (Aubrey, 1977; Gladding, 2012; Goodyear, 1984). As an emergent profession, counseling was born out of a milieu that championed a developmental and empowerment-oriented perspective. The focus of Davis and Parsons was to encourage self-reflection and awareness within the context of vocation and guidance. The true power of impact was perceived to be accomplished through prevention and education within the context of development and empowerment. Thus, professional counseling is rooted and grounded in a developmental and empowerment perspective that continues to manifest in contemporary humanistic counseling. The synonymic nature of humanism and professional counseling is reflected by the commitment to empowerment as the primary goal and process of counseling.

Presupposition III: Empowerment is a centralizing humanistic value that is a cornerstone of professional counseling.

Professional counseling has a foundation of recognizing the uniqueness and dignity of individuals and their freedom to grow (Bohart, 2003; Cain, 2001; Midgette & Meggert, 1991; Raskin et al., 2008; Scholl et al., 2012). The empowerment model influences all roles and functions of professional counselors. The focus of counseling is relational, empowering, growth oriented, and strength based. The consensus definition of counseling is “a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families,
and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals” (20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling, 2010, para. 2). Such a definition highlights the humanistic values of counseling and emphasizes the organizing tenet of empowerment. The act of empowering diverse individuals, families, and groups is an example of counseling in action (Scholl et al., 2012). Empowerment is the catalyst and pathway for change in professional counseling and is reflected in the humanistic paradigm. Counselors focus on collaborative goal setting and navigating client issues from a shared and mutual stance, thereby working “with” clients (Brady-Amoon, 2011; Lemberger, 2010).

Professional counselors have a philosophical commitment to promoting the growth and development of the individual (Day-Vines & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Myers, 1992; Myers & Sweeney, 2005). Thus, the overarching goals of professional counseling are to empower client and community change and promote resiliency. As counselors endorse a humanistic philosophy and a wellness paradigm, empowerment and resiliency become the processes of enacting such values. Professional counselors invoke an empowering stance through the exploration of the developmental context of clients, and recognition of the role of sociocultural factors of individual experience. They further evidence a commitment to optimism and growth, encourage a holistic perspective regarding client wellness, and cultivate resiliency as stressors are encountered (Bohart, 2003; Scholl et al., 2012). Such values reflect the synonymic nature of humanism and professional counseling.

Frankl (1984) alluded to the idea that empowerment comes from within, and one has the possibility to make what one can of a given circumstance. External models of empowerment could deliver a connection between humanism and social justice advocacy that serves as a grounding platform for philosophical intersections of humanism and social justice—if systems of advocacy delivery relied on individual inputs through action research models (Wood, 2013). Rendón (2009) insisted that finding a connection between one’s spiritual or holistic being and the constricting shackles of oppression is the path to liberation and wholeness. In fact, the case for considering humanism as central to social justice counseling can be introduced as the path toward empowerment and community building.

The empowerment framework also plays a critical role in counselor goal setting and intentionality of intervention. Interventions and therapeutic goals must be developmentally appropriate, strength based, wellness oriented, and culturally relevant to optimize a client’s success in meeting his or her goal (Kress & Paylo, 2014). Wellness and development become conduits for the client to experience self-empowerment and growth. Empowerment and resiliency are the pathways that professional counselors traverse to embody the values of humanistic counseling (Seccombe, 2002). Thus, empowerment is a central tenet of humanistic counseling that has been championed by
professional counselors since the inception of the profession. Such a model correlates to an emphasis on wellness, individual context, and social justice (Chung & Bemak, 2002, 2012).

Presupposition IV: Professional counseling and humanism are both grounded in the wellness paradigm, which values the optimization of well-being at the individual, group, and community levels. The wellness paradigm champions the striving of humans toward health, the interdependency of ourselves, and a preventative and proactive orientation.

A humanistic counseling philosophy places an emphasis on people as complex, and as such, much consideration is given to a holistic perspective. A holistic perspective is characterized by an understanding that the parts of something are intimately interconnected and explicable only in reference to the whole. A humanistic perspective also holds that people have an orientation toward self-actualization and decision making that supports their wellness and growth (Scholl et al., 2012; Task Force for the Development of Practice Recommendations for the Provision of Humanistic Psychosocial Services, 2004).

Wellness is a concept that is integrally linked with a humanistic philosophy. The counseling profession has advocated for theoretical models of wellness, specifically, models that encourage and support health and de-emphasize illness (Myers & Sweeney, 2005). Wellness is generally defined as an active process of becoming aware of and making choices that facilitate healthy, fulfilling lives. Wellness perspectives typically focus on the connections between multiple aspects of human functioning, and these may include mental functioning, physical health, and spirituality, in the context of intimate relationships, work, and recreation (Witmer & Sweeney, 1992). Consistent with a humanistic perspective, wellness models are founded on the idea that people have the potential to lead rich and vibrant lives.

Professional counselors typically seek to encourage wellness through developmental, preventive, and wellness-enhancing counseling activities. Wellness models emphasize the maximization of human potential and promote clients living optimally full lives (Dunn, 1977). The humanistic view of wellness connects individuals’ overall levels of life satisfaction and wellness-related factors to common issues presented in counseling (e.g., anxiety, depression). Striving for optimal well-being as endorsed by the wellness paradigm is parallel to the self-actualizing tendency and quest of searching as postulated by humanistic philosophers Maslow (1968) and Bugental (1987), respectively.

Presupposition V: Humanism espouses a social justice paradigm and recognizes the context in which all of us, counselors and clients too, experience our lives. Social justice advocacy becomes the vehicle through which professional counseling enacts the values of humanism across theoretical models.
Given its relationship to empowerment and development, social justice is inextricably grounded in humanistic philosophy (Chung & Bemak, 2002; Constantine & Sue, 2006; Pedersen, 1990). As professional counselors attend to the role of the sociocultural and ecological factors of their clients’ lived experiences, there is an inherent grounding in the tenets of humanism. Professional counseling has been sensitive to and integrated a variety of contextual factors into its understanding of human behavior and how to best help people change (Aloni, 2008). Contextually, there is synergy between humanism and culture when exploring how social and cultural foundations are human creations transferred through time and generations (Carter & Qureshi, 1995).

To better contextualize how humanism is synergistic and situated within social justice, one need only refer to a summary of classifications for cultural counseling and methods of intervention. An example includes the belief that professional counselors should transcend the construct of race (Carter & Qureshi, 1995; Constantine, 2001) while still considering its substantive place in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), acknowledge and celebrate differences, engage cultural informants, and explore the identity of self—a conviction that is foundational to humanism and humanistic counseling (Chung & Bemak, 2002). The innovations demanded of us as humanistic counselors include recognizing and valuing the contextualization of clients within their environments, communities, families, and cultural groups (Alsup, 2009). The emphasis on relationships and holism that defines humanism is synergistically aligned with the values of social justice advocacy (Ratts, 2009; Ratts, D’Andrea, & Arredondo, 2004). Professional counselors can take the opportunity presented by the interconnections of humanism, social justice, and empowerment through the client’s discovery of his or her liberty and embrace the urgent call to enact change at the systems level to engender the most optimized circumstances for personal development (Ratts & Wood, 2011). An inert state of counseling devoid of significant sociopolitical changes that leave people behind and without resources invites a potential separation from the action and intervention required of counselors, who have the opportunity to ensure that those who are most in need of counseling and social justice advocacy will receive it (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2002; Vontress, Johnson, & Epp, 1999). In fact, humanistically oriented counselors are compelled to advance optimal environmental conditions through social justice actions to support the individual to best maximize the self, thus constituting a dialectical interaction (M. E. Lemberger, personal communication, February 23, 2014).

Conceiving a dialogic devoid of the amalgamation of the concepts of humanism, social justice, and counseling would be to revert to a time when only the privileged few were afforded the opportunity to engage in mental health counseling supports (Freire, 1970). Freire (1970) wrote extensively about the divisions existing between the privileged and the oppressed, and
how that chasm intensifies as the oppressed become oppressors, leaving their own ecosystems behind to search for something better embodied in the potentially faceless privileged few. In fact, negating the critical need for sociopolitical activism within the counseling profession ignores humanism as a core of the profession and, ostensibly, as a catalyst to support clients while highlighting their strengths regardless of their privilege or circumstance (Chung & Bemak, 2012; Lightsey, 2006; Smith, 2006).

Simply stated, without the tenets of humanism folded into constructs of social justice advocacy and liberation theory, the current concept of professional counseling might not exist. When considering the tenets of humanism, one generally catalogs the ideas of recognizing the “dignity of all human beings, affirming the right of each individual to choose and work toward his or her own goals, and asserting the importance of service to the community” (Lewis, 2011, p. 183). Lewis’s (2011) community counseling model detailed the inextricable tie between counselors and the communities they serve, thus exemplifying the notion that counseling cannot occur without a strong bond to community. Community can thus be defined as the foundation for social justice advocacy, and cannot be separate from humanism as a concept and counseling as the method of delivery (Vera & Speight, 2003). To contemplate social justice separate from humanism in the context of counseling seems impossible when considering the ideals and foundations of its core.

Social justice as grounded in humanism is foundational to its understanding. In fact, humanism relies on social justice as its core, and cannot exist separate from it, particularly as a path toward liberation and empowerment (Alsup, 2009; Freire, 1970; Lewis, 2011; Pharr, 1996; Rendón, 2009). So, when considering social justice in the context of collectivist or individualist ideals (Vontress et al., 1999), one can still point to humanism as the common thread and counseling as the human interaction model. An aspirational goal for counselors may include the embodiment of an epitome in which every inspiration and action to champion another occurs in the context of social justice advocacy. This embodiment can, ideally, be grounded in humanism separate from medicalized and pathologized models favored by power structures (Hansen, 2012) destined to extract financial gain from human suffering. Gergen (1991) espoused the idea that social beings need social systems to function. Hansen’s (2006) call to nurture the original canons of humanism can also be used as an argument to sustain the social systems designed to support one another through tough times, rather that straying from those systems. Counselors will thrive in a universe where every perception integrates the process of understanding individuals in the context of their circumstances, and how those individuals have often arrived into those circumstances through sociopolitical objectives imposed upon them to benefit the privileged (Vera & Speight, 2003). Counselors must consider a milieu of recognizing that, although people might have made choices generating circumstances detrimental to their capability of functioning in a role of
self-advocacy, the power constructs designed to retain authority for the few exacerbate any negative choices made. The concept of *conscientização* (Freire, 1970) is alive within the counseling profession. Social justice advocacy exists amid the paradigms of the societal safety nets either present, perceived, missing, or unattainable, and counselors are the potential stakeholders who can tie together the many threads of social injustice into a tapestry of hope for their clients, students, and, ultimately, each other.

Finally, each human is not only a product of multiple self-systems (Hansen, 2006) and sociopolitical intricacies, but also a strength-based agent of self-advocacy holding the potential for liberation (Chung & Bemak, 2012; Freire, 1970; Maslow, 1968; Rendón, 2009; Vontress et al., 1999). In the context of social justice, authenticity and the pursuit of unassailable intercultural interactions enhance the practice of counseling, and thus the praxis of humanism. The hope offered through initial therapeutic contact is indispensable to the process of professional counseling and resides at the core of humanism, social justice advocacy, and liberation. Inherent to this process is the foundation to understanding the lived realities of our clients.

DISCUSSION

When contextualizing the identified forces of counseling, one finds that humanism lies at the heart of the profession, a fitting place for the dynamism that grounds our practice while simultaneously informing its progressive thought and action. It is the philosophical values of humanism that are analogous to the values of professional counseling. Relationality, development, empowerment, wellness, and social justice are five fundamental tenets that evidence how humanism is a metaparadigmatic framework for professional counseling.

Central to the identity of professional counselors is the inherent valuing of the therapeutic relationship and the influence it holds on the process of counseling. The humanistic alliance serves to bond the protagonists within the therapeutic relationship, providing the stage for development and growth, and thereby tapping into the resiliency of the individual. Our professional ability to holistically conceptualize our clients as dimensionalized persons capable of both growth and actualization (Hansen, 2006) serves as a grounding action centered in humanism. This action serves as a catalyst for the connecting presuppositions of wellness and empowerment through social justice. Individual wellness is supported by the ability to contextualize wellness as a paradigm connected to the lived experience of the client. Social justice is what permits the visualization of the client as the sum of his or her lived experience, encompassing a social contextual and ecological environment born out of history and culture. It is the synergy of these values that manifests the core of humanism and professional counseling.
Professional counselors can be seen as nurturers of these presuppositions contributing to foundational aspects of the existence emergent through the enactment of humanism. With humanism at the center, grounding our contextualization and conceptualization of human existence while simultaneously embracing a variety of helping orientations (Hansen, 2006), we honor the complexity of the self. According to Hansen (2006) and Vontress (1996), the profession of counseling has tradition grounded in humanism that values the diversity of both the clients and counselors. Fundamental values that differentiate counseling from other mental health professions reflect multiple beliefs centering humanism as the professional worldview of counseling. Juxtaposed with other professions, counseling is defined by its emphasis on relationality, development and growth, empowerment, social justice, and wellness. These defining tenets of counseling are inextricably tied to the values of humanism, thereby evidencing the synonymic nature of these two constructs. To be a counselor is to be a humanist.

REFERENCES


