Exploring the Boundary Between Counseling and Pastoral Counseling: A Delphi Study

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Pastoral counseling and counseling share common training, interests, and goals, yet also include distinct differences. Members of both professions can benefit in having a clearer understanding of these similarities and differences as such knowledge can give greater strength to the workings of both fields. This study was interested in exploring, through use of a Delphi method, how leading educators of both fields perceive the commonalities and differences of pastoral counseling and counseling. By gaining an understanding of the perspectives from which members of each field are trained, clinicians from both areas can grasp a better awareness of the intent and purpose of each discipline.

Recently counseling has been more concerned with religious and spiritual issues (Giblin, 1996). Counselors are becoming more aware that religion and spirituality play an important role in clients’ lives. Counseling textbooks (Peterson & Nisenholz, 1999) have been revised to include spiritual elements. Conversely, professionals working in pastoral care are becoming more aware of the importance of counseling skills in pastoral settings (Posey, 1997; Wicks & Parsons, 1993). Both fields appear to overlap along the spiritual dimension of human care, however practitioners in both settings express uncertainty about the professional boundaries that separate them. It seems that both fields would gain strength in understanding the unique perspective and contributions each discipline can offer. For example, a counselor with a strong understanding of the limits of his or her own field can have a greater sense of when to refer a client to a pastoral counselor by knowing what pastoral counseling can offer.

In trying to gain a preliminary understanding of the boundaries between these two professions, one can examine previous research conducted on this topic. Although research exists that discusses the importance of spirituality in counseling, no research exists that specifically examines the boundaries between counseling and pastoral counseling. Since through research this issue has not been previously clarified, one can instead look towards academic definitions held by each profession to gain some clarity. Wicks and Parsons (1993) sum pastoral counseling as, “…a response by a baptized person to the call to help others in a quite defined way” (p.2). This “way” includes training in psychology and theology, understanding of clients’ problems,
creating the foundation for growth, and opening clients to receive God’s grace (Wicks & Parsons, 1993). This view of pastoral counseling suggests the pastoral counselor receives a specific training which includes understanding of mental and spiritual health. Also, the pastoral counselor must gain a specialized knowledge of clients and client concerns, all with the goal of assisting the client towards healing. As the quote suggests, healing is also a function of being prepared to receive God’s grace.

Definitions of counseling also tend to include similar elements. One definition of counseling provided by Cavanagh (1982) contends that counseling involves several elements such as professional training, a therapeutic relationship, counseling skills combined with a helpful personality, and growth producing experiences. Another description of counseling includes that counselors must meet a level of competency, the standard of which is created by a central accrediting body (Neukrug, 1999). Similar to pastoral counseling, counselors must learn specific knowledge about mental health and client concerns. Healing for the client is often viewed as being in direct proportion to the quality of the therapeutic relationship between counselor and client (Peterson & Nisenholz, 1999).

Although definitions provided by various authors in counseling and pastoral counseling may use different language, all approaches relay similar ideas. Both counseling and pastoral counseling discuss concepts of therapeutic relationships, both speak of specialized training, and both recognize the importance of growth producing environments. However, counseling and pastoral counseling are not the same. They appear to differ on at least one main point – the inclusion of specific religious doctrine. Also, despite the recognized need for religious understanding, counseling training programs rarely include religious or spiritual training (Weaver, Koenig, & Larson, 1997). Thus, despite definitional similarities, fieldwork may present a different picture.

Because the overlap between counseling and pastoral counseling is so large, the distinctions and unique contributions of each specialization are at risk. Clients with a religious orientation might be errantly led to believe that a professional counselor is best suited to assist in a circumstance of personal crisis, transition, or decision making, when indeed a pastoral counselor, more knowledgeable of the client’s religious world view, may be a better choice. Similarly, a client may be led to believe that a pastoral counselor is best suited to attend to the emotional needs of a client because of a compatible religious belief even though the pastoral counselor may not be trained in addressing the client’s specific concern.

Attempting to understand the clinical applications of pastoral counseling and counseling becomes a daunting task as clinicians of both fields employ several techniques and often tailor their approaches to specific client needs. However, examining the type of training received by clinicians in both fields can lend insight into the professional and academic perception of each field. Academic programs must often remain at the forefront of field development, research, and understanding, and therefore academic programs can often display the current beliefs and emphases of a particular discipline. Thus, this study turned to academic programs to begin the process of exploring similarities and differences between counseling and pastoral counseling.

It is the focus of this study to identify the distinction between pastoral and professional counseling. Using the delphi method, senior representatives from academic programs in the fields of professional counseling and pastoral counseling were identified. From the definitions provided by these experts, the similarities and differences perceived between counseling and pastoral counseling can be identified.
Method

Participants

Potential participants for this study were identified through the American Theological Society (ATS) for pastoral counselors and the Counsel for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) for counselor education. Since both organizations develop the standards for accreditation of training programs, it was assumed that schools accredited by these bodies would be most similar in professional expectations of academic performance. Programs accredited by both organizations are based on the highest standards for both fields, and those teaching in such programs were assumed to be the most authoritative on the subject. Pastoral counseling participants consisted of professors of accredited doctoral pastoral counseling programs. The participants representing professional counseling were drawn from accredited doctoral level counselor education programs. All participants were required to be associate or full professors, educators with at least 7 years of experience in academia, with an accredited institution. The participants ranged in age from 45 through 67. The decision to use professors to represent the pastoral and professional counselors was to insure a higher degree of parity between the two groups. It was believed that having achieved the rank of associate or full professor insured that the participants would be more likely to have contemplated the distinction of their profession as separate from the other, and that both groups would be represented by a sampling of senior authorities who could speak for their respected professions.

A total of 42 professional counselors and 37 pastoral counselors were contacted through e-mail. The nature of the study was explained and they were invited to participate. Initially, 7 pastoral counselors and 13 counselors participated in this study. However, due to difficulties in data collection, such as unreliable internet connections, personal crises, or inability to meet deadlines, some participants could not complete the data collection process. The final number of participants for this study was 6 pastoral counselors and 8 counselors.

The pastoral counselor participants consisted of 5 men and 1 woman. All pastoral counseling professors had obtained a Ph.D. and ranged in post-doctorate degree experience from 7 years to 28 years. All pastoral counselor participants reported 7 to 22 years experience in their current work settings including teaching at seminary. Also, 3 participants reported working in a public or private mental health setting in addition to teaching. Pastoral counseling participants reported 2,000 to 10,000 + hours of direct counseling experience. All pastoral counseling participants identified their religious faith as Protestant.

The counselor educator participants consisted of 5 men and 3 women. Of the counselor educators, 5 reported having a Ph.D., 2 reported an Ed.D., and 1 reported having a Sc.D. The number of years of post-doctorate experience ranged from 22 to 31 years. All were university professors and had been in their current work settings for 20 to 31 years. Counseling participants reported a range of 5,000 to 10,000 + hours of direct counseling experience.
Measure and Procedure

Because this study was directed toward gathering professionals’ opinions about the fields of counseling and pastoral counseling, qualitative methods seemed most appropriate for attaining this type of information. A Delphi method was used via internet to gather information. Historically, the Delphi was used to survey a panel of experts, through repeated rounds, to achieve consensus among those experts. This method has often been used to discover alternatives, explore underlying assumptions, seek out information, educate groups, and correlate judgments on a topic. The advantage of using a Delphi approach is that participants are provided surveys to answer, and participants do not need to meet face-to-face to reach consensus.

Achieving agreement through this method dispels the effects of group dynamics on the decision making process, and also facilitates a speedier outcome (Page-McCuistion, 1997). Since most educational institutions are internet-accessible, and this study focused on educators, e-mail was seen to be a viable alternative to mailed questionnaires. An e-mail questionnaire was also thought to be least obtrusive, costly, and time-consuming. E-mail also provided a simple avenue for correspondence between the researchers and participants when necessary. Ideally no less than 30 members participate in each identified group for optimal robustness. However, the Delphi method in theory can be applied to any number of individuals and achieve reliable results. As this study is a preliminary investigation, the small number of participants was still deemed by the researchers as acceptable for determining a meaningful outcome.

Participants were e-mailed an initial survey that included a description of the project and a consent form. Participants were asked initially to answer three questions. Questions used in a Delphi study are intended to be open-ended in order for participants to freely generate responses (Page-McCuistion, 1997). The questions for pastoral counselors were 1) define the field of pastoral counseling, 2) how are pastoral counseling and counseling similar, and 3) how are pastoral counseling and counseling different. Questions for counselor educators were 1) define the field of counseling, 2) how are counseling and pastoral counseling similar, and 3) how are counseling and pastoral counseling different. All participants were given 2 weeks to respond and asked to limit their responses to 300 words or less. This limit was intended to allow participants to keep their answers as concise as possible, as well as keep the responses from becoming too cumbersome.

After receiving responses from the initial mailing, responses to the questions were compiled and re-sent in Round 2 (each mailing is referred to as a “round”). The responses were listed in no specific order and participants were asked to identify the 6 best responses from those listed. Delphi procedures tend to depend on the questions being asked, sample size, and degree of consensus being reached (Page-McCuistion, 1997). Thus in some cases, several rounds are necessary for consensus.

Because of the small sample size in this study and the content similarity between responses, consensus after round 2 appeared to be nearly reached. To identify how similar or different responses were, in order to determine the necessity of rounds beyond round 3, the number of votes per response were compared to determine if any significant difference existed between responses. For example, 3 participants may have selected one response, and the remaining 4 participants chose another response, but both responses contained similar or overlapping content. Because of this circumstance, it became necessary to determine if a true difference existed between the responses, or if the vote was split because the responses were very
similar. By comparing these rates of response to a calculated necessary response value for significance to a singular item, one could determine mathematically if participants perceived any real difference between the two responses. This necessary response value was a percentage of responses an item needed to receive in order to be considered significant, and this percentage was based on the number of responses per question. If a difference was found, items were kept as separate for the 3rd round. If no difference was found, the items were combined. This method revealed that only a 3rd round would be necessary to achieve consensus.

Round 3 consisted of returning the selected responses from round 2 and asking participants to choose the best response of those listed. As some participants commented, many of the choices by this point seemed very similar to each other. Participants chose which response listed best described their position in relation to the question asked. Responses that were not selected were dropped at this point, and remaining responses were compiled and broken down into themes. Themes were determined by having the researchers examine the final responses for similar content patterns or distinct differences. These themes were then compared across fields for common and unique perceptions from each. In this round, participants were also asked to provide demographic information.

**Results**

Through the process of the Delphi study, several factors were incorporated into the definition of pastoral counseling. Themes for the definition of pastoral counseling included: delivery of helping services, theological and psychological training, and a religious context. Pastoral counseling was viewed as an academic and practical field that used a recognized body of literature and conducted research to improve that knowledge. The counseling skills of pastoral counselors include the ability to use “theological reflection” as well as interventions that may be more related to religion, such as prayer. Another important element of the definition is that pastoral counselors are also recognized by a faith community, are responsible to that community, and are committed to that community. Thus the religious/spiritual dimension of pastoral counseling is involved at the academic, professional, and personal levels.

The results revealed that counselor educators define counseling as a process which facilitates an individual’s growth, identifies clients’ strengths, and promotes clients’ dignity, welfare, and development. Furthermore, counseling adheres to a collaborative model and rests on an accepted body of literature. Interventions are done with intentionality and clients are viewed holistically. Unlike pastoral counseling, however, counselors did not see themselves responsible to a faith community, but rather, to an approved code of ethics.

In response to the second question, “how are counseling and pastoral counseling similar” counselors and pastoral counselors report common themes. According to counselors, both fields require professional training, make intentional interventions, are informed by a body of literature and research, and use a self-imposed standard of conduct. Furthermore, counselors believe both disciplines address clients’ meanings, problems, and opportunities in life. According to pastoral counselors, both fields use psychotherapeutic theory and practice, and are accountable to the standards and ethics of that theory and practice. Also, pastoral counselors believe that both fields deal with the human context and use the relationship between the counselor and client as a tool for change. Counselors and pastoral counselors believe that both fields could be completely congruent. Since not all pastoral counseling involves
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religious/spiritual concepts, as one pastoral counselor stated, “…there may be no apparent
differences but great similarity to other forms of counseling.” A similar statement recorded by a
counselor read, “Depending on the expertise of the practitioner, it would be possible to have the
two professions overlap completely.”

Despite the apparent similarities between the two fields, educators in this study identified
at least two major areas of difference between counseling and pastoral counseling. Appearing
somewhat obvious, the first difference involves the amount of religious immersion experienced
in both fields. Counselor educators addressed the notion that counseling can involve spiritual and
religious concerns, but conceded that pastoral counselors are likely more comfortable with this
type of subject and have other skills at their disposal for addressing religious conversations. An
example is the statement, “As a group, pastoral counselors probably feel more comfortable
helping clients deal with matters of a spiritual development, although an increasing number of
non-pastoral counselors willingly, and ably, address such matters.”

Pastoral counselors, on the other hand, identified the presence of religion and spirituality
across several domains, including training, techniques, personal devotion, and community
involvement. According to pastoral counselors, professional identity usually falls under the title
of “pastor” rather than “counselor”. Pastoral counselors also believe that counseling involves a
spiritual dimension and the “expression of a faith of a particular religious community.”
Additionally, pastoral counselors reported feeling more open to and available to use religious
resources such as prayer, theology, and biblical language. A final difference identified by
pastoral counselors was that due to their position in the community, they have “access to people
in many settings and circumstances all throughout the life span.”

Discussion

The results of the Delphi study reveal that the professions of counseling and pastoral
counseling, in general, see the two professions as being similar. However, neither field sees itself
as synonymous with the other. Responses from both fields suggest that the dimensions of one’s
work do not lie solely in whether or not one carries the title of counselor or pastoral counselor,
but in the level of competence achieved by members of either profession. Although this research
did not address specifically the issue of ethics, both professions appear concerned about the
ethical behaviors of their practitioners. Thus, knowing the limits and boundaries of each field can
only aid practitioners in making informed ethical decisions related to their practice.

Through the course of this research it was uncovered that counseling and pastoral
counseling differ along two fundamental lines. The first difference referred to religious
commitment. Pastoral counselors noted a principle obligation to pastoral duties, or ministry, over
that of counseling. Pastoral counselors define themselves as pastors first. Priority is given to
religious faith, community, and obligation. Counselors do not profess a faith commitment and
are often discouraged to do so. Because a pastoral counselor’s faith is embedded in his or her
practice, pastoral counselors will utilize religious methods for healing. Furthermore, pastoral
counselors more readily enter into religious or spiritual conversation. Again, counselors, due to
lack of religious training, tend to be reluctant to encroach on religious ground.

The second area of difference addresses the concept of professional accountability. Counselors
and pastoral counselors remarked about both fields adhering to standards of conduct and ethical
guidelines. However, the two groups differ as far as what body holds them accountable.
Counselor educators described being accountable to the psychological knowledge and standards of the profession, while pastoral counselors discussed being ultimately accountable to their own faith community. This difference illustrates the depth of spirituality and religion for pastoral counselors because they work in their faith community and are held accountable by that group. Although one can assume that other counselors will also be accountable to their clients, this point was not stressed by any of the counselor educator participants.

The results of this study suggest that counseling and pastoral counseling could contribute to the professional development of each other by promoting mutual understanding. For example, some academicians in both fields have expressed concerns related to ethical decision making of clinicians. Pastors recognize that sometimes clients present with concerns that could be better served by someone with greater counseling training. Additionally, some counselors recognize that some client concerns would best be addressed by pastors or other religious leaders. Posey (1997) identified similar concerns in an article where he addressed issues of pastoral competency in counseling settings. He notes that pastoral counselors need to be very aware of the limitations of their training so as to provide the best care possible for clients. Overall, these understandings beg the question of when to refer.

Based on the results of this investigation, some boundaries of counseling and pastoral counseling have been identified which can help practitioners in both fields make referral decisions. A counselor now knowing that pastoral counselors incorporate their faith orientation into their every-day personal and professional lives and discuss the subject freely, could refer a client bringing up concerns about his or her faith relationship with God, for example, to a pastoral counselor. Or perhaps a counselor has a client dealing with issues related to the death of a loved one and is wondering about the life-after. Again, this client’s concern may be better suited by a pastoral counselor. Although a pastoral counselor may have specialized training in specific counseling areas, they may also see a member of their congregation, for example, presenting with issues beyond their expertise and need to refer that client to a counselor with greater training in that area. This situation does not sound very different from when any counseling professional encounters a client’s problem that he or she is not adequately trained to work with.

Some limitations to this investigation need to be addressed. In Delphi studies, ideally 30 subjects are involved. In this study, only a total of 14 subjects participated in the research. Of course, originally, Delphi methods were used in situations requiring immediate decisions and therefore used whatever personnel were available. Thus, the low participation rate does not invalidate the results, but the strength of the results may not be as great as possible. To gain greater clarity into the boundaries between counseling and pastoral counseling, this study could be duplicated to include more participants. It is of interest to note though that so many educators did decline to participate, at least opening the question as to what it is about this particular subject that may have led potential participants to decline. Perhaps a follow up to this study would be to identify what hesitations or biases professionals of both fields may hold that actually prevent discussion rather than promote it.

Another limitation to this study involves the definition of “expert”. For ease in conducting this study, experts were defined as teachers and practitioners, with at least 7 years of teaching experience. Because this study focused on primarily educators, these results are considered to be pictures of the educational ideal. This definition leaves out many practitioners with many years of experience who are not tenured professors. Private practitioners, assistant
professors, and other mental health professionals of both counseling and pastoral counseling could be used in future research to gain further insight into the boundaries between counseling and pastoral counseling.

The overall usefulness of this research lies in the clarification of the similarities and differences as provided by academic experts in counseling and pastoral counseling. Although many practitioners of both fields have suspected or assumed several of these inherent differences, developing an understanding of these differences beyond the level of speculation can greatly enhance the strength of both fields and their abilities to assist each other as helping professions. This research study is a substantial step in that direction. Future research can use these findings as a starting point for developing further research questions and studies for understanding boundaries between counseling and pastoral counseling.
References


