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Developing Our Own Identity as Therapists

Henry L. Isaksen, PhD

First let me point out that this is the Association of Mormon Counselors and Psychotherapists. As one of the “founding fathers” of AMCAP, I considered myself at the time and still consider myself a counselor, not a therapist. Since this is still my frame of reference, perhaps I am not the one who should be addressing this topic. Yet I am very appreciative of Anne’s invitation to present my point of view and I do so in the hope that there are other members of the Association who feel, as I do, that we who prefer to call ourselves counselors rather than therapists: who believe the distinction between counseling and therapy should not be overlooked. This difference was recognized and respected by those of us who met some 15 years ago to choose a name (you will recall that the name of AMCAP’s predecessor was LDS Personnel and Guidance Association, which was too restrictive) and to “hammer out” the By-Laws in such a way that all of us would be comfortable in our personal choices and in our associations together as fellow members of the Church and of the helping professions we represent.

Perhaps the world has changed enough in the last 15 years to justify rewriting the By-Laws—and perhaps even changing the name of our organization—in such a way as to eliminate the distinction. To that I would reply, perhaps what we really need to
do is seek for a better understanding and acceptance of the difference.

In order to provide some background for my position, let me first tell you something about how I came to be a counselor, rather than a therapist.

As the youngest of seven children, I enjoyed many benefits that were not available to most of my older siblings, one of which was the expectation that I would go to college. That opened an almost endless vista of career opportunities to me. A very poor math teacher in high school inspired me to be a good math teacher when I grew up, so that became my goal and math became my undergraduate major. Because my college years were during the depth of the depression (1935–1939) and my parents were struggling for basic survival, I had to “work my way through.” One of my jobs—one I had both at San Jose State (from where I graduated) and at BYU (during my Junior year)—involved scoring “tests” that were given to entering Freshmen. These test scores were supplied to faculty advisors, who used them in their efforts to “counsel” their advisees. Most of you are not old enough to remember these “tests,” but you have read about them: I’m sure—tests such as the Bernreuter Personality Inventory, the Thorndyke Test of Basic Skills, etc.—pretty primitive by today’s standards! But my friend, Art Browne, and I were fascinated by them and by the emerging personnel and guidance movement. We were flattered when students would come to us and say, “My advisor tried to tell me what those test scores mean, but he didn’t seem to know much about them. Would you interpret them for us?” So early on, we both developed an interest in personnel work and decided to minor in psychology. Not a bad decision, in view of the fact that openings for math teachers were scarce and salaries were very low. (Besides, I had elected to meet certification requirements later on as part of my Master’s Degree program.) But there was an opening in Los Angeles for a Youth Personnel Supervisor in the new National Youth Administration program that called for a background in psychology. I traveled to Los Angeles and got the job—at a salary nearly twice that of my friends who took teaching jobs.

Working with youth who were eligible for Federal assistance through the NYA program involved a lot of counseling, as well as
testing, placement and follow-up—all functions of the emerging personnel and guidance movement. I loved it. But after only a few months my mission call came and I left for Chicago. Even in the mission field I did a lot of personnel work as secretary to the mission president (who, in those days, had no counselors). Then followed a year of personnel work in a war industry prior to two-and-one-half years as a Personnel Classification Specialist in the Army Air Corps.

At the end of the war, I was tempted to accept a very promising offer from two physicians I had met during my military days. They offered to sponsor me through medical school, then have me join them in a thriving practice. I guess that is where I really had to make a choice between working in an educational setting where I could concentrate primarily on the prevention of disorders and a therapeutic setting where I would be concentrating primarily on the treatment of disorders. I have never regretted that choice—except momentarily, perhaps, on those rather frequent occasions when the money runs out before the end of the month!

A year at Stanford University followed, where I earned my teaching certificate and a Master’s Degree in Guidance. By then, as indicated, I had decided that I wanted to be a counselor. But a counselor’s certificate required two years of teaching experience. Fine. I had not forgotten my “miserable” math teacher in high school nor my determination to be a “good” one. Chaffey Union High School in Ontario, California was a great place to teach and I was, I believe, a good math teacher. In fact, I was urged, at the end of my two years there, to stay on as a math teacher with the promise that I would be considered for the counselor’s job some day. No thanks. I had already made my decision to go for a doctorate.

I moved to Utah and entered the PhD program in Educational Psychology with an emphasis on counseling and a minor in Educational Administration. I wanted to prepare myself as best I could with the skills I would need to help students achieve their full potential—not only in school, but in life. All students, not just those who were having problems. Prevention of problems, rather than treatment through intervention, was to be my emphasis.
However, my program included many classes and a good deal of practice in the diagnosis and treatment of problems—psychological, social, and educational. (I worked half-time as a “veteran’s appraiser” in the University Counseling Center during the two years I was there.)

Since 1950, when I completed the course work for my PhD, I have worked primarily as a counselor, counselor educator, or supervisor of counseling and other student personnel services in a wide variety of settings: from public schools, universities, colleges and private schools to church, business, government, and community agencies—always with an emphasis on counseling as a way of preventing problems, rather than on the treatment of problems through therapy.

You might well ask, is there really that much difference between counseling and therapy? It must be obvious to you by now that I think there is a very significant difference, one that should be debated and explored in depth. The need for both is obvious, as is the value of each. Yet the difference is not clearly perceived, I feel, by most of us nor by the public at large. More good counseling, especially in the schools—and particularly in the elementary grades—might serve to reduce the need for so much therapy.

Yes, it is a question that we need to consider. But since it is not within the scope of this presentation, perhaps it could be addressed at a future meeting. Until then, I urge you to ponder the question, especially as it relates to the gospel concept of free agency (another interesting subject that needs to be explored in depth).

Thank you, Anne, for inviting me to raise my “personal voice” on this most important and interesting subject, “Developing our Own Identity as Therapists.” I hope, if nothing else, that my voice has served to stir up some thoughts within each of you that will help you to develop and clarify your own identity as a therapist—or, if you prefer, as a counselor.

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