

The effect of counselling training on differentiation of self, religious quest and epistemological development

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Introduction

Personal growth, development of greater self-awareness and interpersonal and intrapersonal maturation have long been seen as important dimensions of training for those involved in people-helping professions including counselling ([Johns, 1996](#)). The rationale for this emphasis in the training of counselling practitioners is multifaceted but includes: improving the mental and emotional functioning of the trainee; providing the trainee with a more complete understanding of personal and interpersonal dynamics and processes; helping trainees become aware of potential blind-spots that would limit their effectiveness to work with clients from a broad range of backgrounds; and helping to alleviate or mitigate the emotional and psychological stresses that are an inherent part of the people-helping professions ([Grimmer & Tribe, 2001](#)). Most research into this practice has supported this emphasis on facilitating personal and interpersonal growth amongst students of counselling and other related disciplines ([Murphy, 2005](#)). However, several theorists including [Ivey \(2011\)](#) emphasise such approaches must be conducted within strict ethical guidelines that protect students from risk of harm.

The recently reaccredited Bachelor of Social Science (Counselling) and Master of Counselling courses within the School of Social Sciences at Christian Heritage College [CHC] in Australia possess a strong emphasis on the personal and interpersonal growth and development of students. This approach is consistent with both CHC's overall emphasis of *Transforming People to Transform their World*, as well as with the *Training Standards* of the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia [[PACFA \(2012\)](#)]. Specifically the *PACFA Training Standards of 2012* state that, "Trainees need to demonstrate self-awareness, including the capacity to relate in a facilitative way with others and to reflect on and examine the impact of these actions" (p. 2). Additionally, the standards explain that in order to assist the development of self-awareness amongst trainees, training organisations need to ensure that members, "... have completed a component of self-awareness as part of their training. This... may include group or individual therapy, self-awareness experiences, or family therapy" (p. 4).

Feedback from current and previous counselling students of the School of Social Sciences at CHC suggests that this emphasis on enhancing self-awareness, personal development and interpersonal maturation may be effective for many students and is also viewed by them as being of personal and professional value. However, to date this dimension of CHC's courses has never been subjected to rigorous and systematic investigation. The purpose of this study therefore is to use empirically validated measures of three well-described developmentally-orientated psychological constructs – Differentiation of Self [DoS] ([Bowen, 1978](#)), Religious Questing [Quest] ([Batson & Raynor-Prince, 1983](#)) and Epistemological Development [ED] ([Baxter Magolda, 1992](#); [Erwin, 1983](#); [Perry, 1970](#)) to evaluate the effectiveness of CHC's training programs in facilitating the interpersonal, intrapsychic, spiritual and epistemological maturation of counselling students enrolled in the Bachelor of Social Science (Counselling) and Master of Counselling programs.

Differentiation of Self

According to Bowen Family Systems Theory, DoS is the capacity to recognise and understand relationship patterns and distinguish between emotions and thoughts, enabling individuals to balance intimacy and connection with, and intellectual and emotional autonomy from, others ([Bartle-Haring, Kenny, & Gavazzi, 1999](#); [Majurus & Sandage, 2010](#)).

DoS is commonly accepted to comprise four dimensions: emotional reactivity [ER], I-position [IP], emotional cutoff [EC] and fusion with others ([Gushue & Constantine, 2003](#); [Skowron & Friedlander, 1998](#)). For instance, individuals with lower levels of DoS are less able to cope with stress in the context of relationship (emotional reactivity) and are less capable of maintaining a strong sense of self (I-position). In contrast, individuals with above average self-differentiation feel free to express different thoughts and feelings without the need to either emotionally fuse (fusion with others) or to distance (emotional cutoff) themselves from significant others ([Gushue & Constantine, 2003](#); [Skowron & Friedlander, 1998](#)).

Research has shown that well differentiated relationships in general are characterised by relationship satisfaction ([Lippett, 2005](#)), and psychological wellbeing ([Skowron, Stanley, & Shapiro, 2009](#)), including lower levels of anxiety and depression ([Glade, 2005](#)). In contrast, low levels of DoS have been found to predict higher levels of social anxiety ([Peleg, 2005](#)), alcohol and substance abuse ([Knauth, Skowron, & Escobar, 2006](#)), and partner violence ([Walker, 2007](#)), as well as a greater likelihood that an individual will attempt to cope with stress through emotionally withdrawing from, or becoming over involved with, others ([Bowen, 1978](#)).

Religious Questing

A second significant construct associated with human development is Religious Questing [Quest], a dimension of spirituality conceived by Daniel Batson and associates ([Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993](#)) who argued that Quest could be viewed as representative of religious maturity.

For instance, [Batson et al. \(1993\)](#) proposed that those high in 'Quest' are more likely to consider doubt rather than certainty to be an important characteristic of their religious beliefs and thus have a greater ability to question rather than just accept established 'truths' (their own as well as the beliefs of established religion). Social science literature has consistently

demonstrated a positive association between Quest and various aspects of psychological maturity including positive mental health, open-mindedness, flexibility, increased helping behaviours ([Darley & Batson, 1973](#)), humility ([Rowatt, Ottenbreit, Nesselroade, & Cunningham, 2002](#)), compassion ([Majerus & Sandage, 2010](#)), and moral reasoning ([Ji, 2004](#)). Significantly, research conducted over two decades has demonstrated a negative association between Quest and intolerance, with individuals high in Quest more likely to be able to tolerate differences in regards to gender, religion, sexual orientation and ethnicity ([Batson, Floyd, Meyer, & Winner, 1999](#); [Luce, Briggs, & Francis, 1987](#); [McFarland, 1989](#)).

Epistemological Development

Epistemological development [ED] refers to the process by which people obtain, interpret, evaluate and justify knowledge across the life span ([Hofer & Pintrich, 2002](#)). Influential educational psychologist William Perry proposed one of the earliest models of ED based on the longitudinal study of male undergraduate students at Harvard University concerning the education they received and the perceptions they held about the authority and role of their lecturers ([Perry, 1970](#)). Based on his findings, Perry hypothesised that students who enter tertiary study often progress through a discernible sequence of up to nine 'positions' that can be clustered into four basic stages of epistemological maturation: *dualistic* (or black and white) thinking; *multiplicity* (where they are aware that there often exist many different claims concerning truth while still upholding that absolute truth exists); *relativism* (characterised by a loss of conviction that ultimate truth can ever be known or even exists); and *commitment* (in which students make choices and commitments related to what truth perspective they will personally accept and base their choices on) ([Henze, 2006](#)).

The overall validity of the Perry model has received reasonable support ([Bendixen, Schraw, & Dunkle, 1998](#)). However it has also been criticised on several grounds, including that it omits important contributors to epistemological style including gender and culture ([Henze, 2006](#)). In an attempt to address the lack of female representation in Perry's original work, [Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule \(1986\)](#) investigated the "ways of knowing" evident in a range of women from diverse backgrounds. While based on [Perry's \(1970\)](#) original approach, Belenky and her colleagues determined that the Perry scheme did not adequately account for some experiences that were common and significant in the lives and epistemological maturation of many women. In particular these researchers identified an additional initial stage they termed *Silence*, in which some women feel disconnected from knowledge and its traditional sources ([Belenky et al., 1986](#)). In addition many women in the study emphasised the importance of 'connected knowing' or the interrelatedness of knowledge, knowing and the knower throughout the process of their epistemological growth ([Love & Guthrie, 1999](#)).

Other researchers in the field purposively studied the process by which personal epistemology grows and changes in student cohorts that included both men and women, in an attempt to understand the similarities and differences that occur for each gender. Two significant examples of such approaches are the qualitatively based study of [Baxter Magolda \(1992\)](#) and the quantitative research of [Erwin \(1983\)](#).

[Baxter Magolda's \(1992\)](#) longitudinal study of the developing epistemological frameworks of 51 female and 50 male college students identified four qualitatively distinguishable stages of ED. The first three stages (i.e., *absolute*, *transitional* and *independent knowing*) possessed

discernible gender-related patterns of how participants derived knowledge and meaning from their educational experiences ([Baxter Magolda, 1992](#)). Men in these stages tended to construct knowledge through stating opinions and debating with others, while women were more likely to employ interpersonal strategies which prioritised collaboration ([Shaw, 2001](#)). However, by the fourth stage (i.e., *contextual knowing*) gender patterns related to ED had largely converged, with both sexes becoming mindful of the role of personal and interpersonal contexts in their construction of knowledge ([Baxter Magolda, 1992](#)).

[Erwin \(1983\)](#) employed factor analysis on quantitative data collected from more than 3300 undergraduate students from a large southwestern U.S. university with the initial aim of attempting to verify Perry's model of ED. This analysis did indeed identify four factors corresponding to four levels of epistemological maturation. However, the ED stages identified by Erwin overlapped but did not entirely correspond to Perry's scheme ([Erwin, 1983](#)). While, evidence was found to validate Perry's stages of *Dualism*, *Relativism*, and *Commitment*, Erwin also reported a new fourth or highest stage of ED, not previously detected by Perry, which he titled *Empathy* ([Erwin, 1983](#)). Erwin argued that this level of constructing and critiquing knowledge represents the highest identifiable stage of ED and is characterised by the capacity to take into account the implications of one's knowledge-based decisions and actions on other people and society as a whole ([Erwin, 1983](#)).

What is apparent from this discussion is that although Baxter Magolda's and Erwin's studies employed different methodologies, both identified an ultimate ED stage, shared by both men and women, which is characterized by the capacity to take into account context and also one's responsibility to self, others and the wider community. It also seems reasonable to argue based on the importance that empathetic and contextually-sensitive knowing play in effective counselling practice ([Basseches, 1997](#)), that the largely analogous final stages of ED described by [Baxter Magolda \(1992\)](#) and [Erwin \(1983\)](#) are potentially important epistemological approaches for counselling training institutions to foster in their students.

Importantly, ED has been demonstrated to consistently predict a number of desirable personal and interpersonal attributes. These include healthy self-esteem ([Oztas, 2010](#)), a desire to maintain close interpersonal relationships ([Nussbaum & Bendixen, 2003](#)), more sophisticated moral reasoning ([Mintchik & Farmer, 2009](#)), lower levels of psychopathology and behavioural problems during adolescence ([Beaudouin & Schonert-Reichl, 2006](#)), and lower levels of intra-familial conflict ([Holmes, Bond, & Byrne, 2008](#)). Studies employing the *Scale of Intellectual Development – II* (SID-II), a measure of ED developed by [Erwin \(1983\)](#) based on his quantitative research described above, have also specifically demonstrated that identification with the two highest levels of ED described by the Erwin scheme (i.e., Commitment and Empathy) significantly predict a number of positive psychosocial outcomes. These include healthy identity development in young adults ([Erwin, 1983](#)), reduced risk-taking behaviour including binge drinking ([Hensley, 1997](#)), higher academic achievement ([Hood & Deopere, 2002](#)), lower levels of racial prejudice amongst trainee counsellors ([Steward, Boatwright, Sauer, Baden, & Jackson, 1998](#)), and a greater capacity for independent learning, exercising initiative and tolerating different viewpoints amongst college alumni ([Erwin, 2012](#)).

Hence it can be reasonably argued that the three developmentally-orientated psychological constructs described above (i.e., DoS, Quest, and ED) may be considered valid and reliable indicators of personal, interpersonal, spiritual and epistemological maturation. Further, well-

validated measures of each of the three constructs exist. These include the *Differentiation of Self Inventory – Revised* (Skowron & Schmitt, 2003); *The Interactional (Quest) Scale* (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991a), and *The Scale of Intellectual Development-II* (Erwin, 1983). As such DoS, Quest, and ED represent potentially useful indicators of the effectiveness of CHC's counselling programs in achieving their stated aims of facilitating student growth and development.

Therefore the particular research question that was investigated by this study was, "How effective are CHC's counselling programs in facilitating students' personal, interpersonal, spiritual and epistemological growth and development?" Specifically, three hypotheses related to this question were tested:

- Hypothesis 1 – Length of enrolment time and number of units completed by CHC counselling students will positively predict levels of DoS and its component dimensions;
- Hypothesis 2 – Length of enrolment time and number of units completed by CHC counselling students will positively predict levels Quest and its constituent domains;
- Hypothesis 3 – Length of enrolment time and number of units completed by CHC counselling students will negatively predict the initial stage of ED (i.e., Dualism) but be positively associated with later stages (i.e., Commitment and Empathy) as described by Erwin's (1983) model.

Method

This study employed a cross-sectional correlational research design employing quantitative data. Correlational research comprises quantifying multiple variables possessed by members of the same group so that statistical analysis can be performed to identify significant relationships that exist between these variables (Shaughnessy, Zechmeister, & Zechmeister, 2008). This design was therefore appropriate for this study given its stated purpose to test hypotheses that participants' length and amount of counselling training would positively predict their levels of DoS, Quest and ED. Permission was obtained from CHC's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) prior to commencing the study.

Participants

Recruitment for the study was conducted in March, 2012. Participants consisted of 74 counselling students enrolled at Christian Heritage College [CHC] in Brisbane, Australia. The sample consisted of 26 (36%) students from the postgraduate Master of Counselling program and 48 (64%) enrolled in the undergraduate Bachelor of Social Science (Counselling). Participants included 63 (85%) females and 11 (15%) males, ranging in age from 18 to 69 years, with a mean age of 43.36 years. Most (92%) were of Caucasian ethnicity with the remainder of Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander (1), Asian (3), Pacific Islander (1) or 'other' (2) descent (two participants did not indicate ethnicity). All respondents indicated that they belonged to the Christian faith tradition, with 69 (94%) participating at least once a week in religious activities including attending a Christian place of worship or prayer.

Measures

DoS and its four component dimensions (ER, EC, IP, and Fusion) were measured using the *Differentiation of Self Inventory – Revised* [DSI-R] (Skowron & Schmitt, 2003), a 46-item self-report Likert scale. Higher scores on the DSI-R are indicative of higher levels of emotional functioning, as well as greater capacity for intimacy and autonomy in significant personal relationships. Skowron and Schmitt (2003) reported that the DSI-R has an internal reliability estimate, as indicated by Cronbach's alpha, of .84.

The *Interactional (Quest) Scale* (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991a) was used to measure religious questing (Quest). This measure comprises a 12-item scale assessing three domains of spirituality (i.e., readiness to face existential questions without reducing their complexity, self-criticism and perception of doubt as positive, and openness to change) (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991b). The scale has shown strong internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of .76 reported by Rootes, Jankowski and Sandage (2010).

The *Scale of Intellectual Development – II* [SID-II] (Erwin, 1983) consists of 106 Likert type items relating to four subscales – Dualism, Relativism, Commitment and Empathy. The first three subscales correspond directly with Perry's (1970) model of ED, while the fourth (Empathy) arguably has more in common with the final position (i.e., *contextual knowing*) of Baxter Magolda's (1992) model of ED. Erwin (1983) reports that alpha coefficients of the four subscales range from .70 (Relativism) to .81 (Dualism), and that higher scores on the latter subscales of Commitment and Empathy positively predict significantly greater levels of prosocial activity, high school grade point averages, and measures of identity development.

Numbers of units completed and total number of semesters of enrolment for each participant were obtained from the College's student database.

Procedure

A research assistant specifically employed for the purpose of data collection, visited all first semester counselling classes with the permission of lecturers over a three week period in March, 2012. Each student present received an information letter about the study, informed consent form, sealable envelope, and questionnaire comprising items relating to demographic information, as well as the DSI-R, Quest Scale, and SID-II described above. In order to ensure that students who were not present when the research assistant visited, or who were studying externally, also had opportunity to participate, this group was emailed an information letter and invitation to take part.

On-campus students who chose to participate returned completed consent forms and questionnaires to the research assistant in the sealed envelope provided using the College's internal mail system. External students who replied to the email inviting them to take part were posted a questionnaire, informed consent form and prepaid and addressed envelope in which to return the forms once completed.

All questionnaires were scored by the research assistant who provided data to the researcher in de-identified and pooled electronic form so that responses from individual students could not be identified. Informed consent forms and questionnaires were stored in separate locked filing cabinets accessible only by the research assistant.

Data Analysis

All analyses were conducted using the SPSS Statistical Package (Version 19).

Results

Prior to analysis all data were evaluated in terms of accuracy of data entry, missing values and possible violations of assumptions of univariate and multivariate normality. Only Quest and two of its component dimensions (i.e., readiness to ask existential questions and openness to change) were found to breach normality. Each was significantly negatively skewed indicating that the sample exhibited a high level of religious questing overall. The three variables were transformed according to the approach suggested by [Tabachnick and Fidell \(2007\)](#) to correct for negative skewness, before being retested in terms of normality assumptions. This indicated that the problem of skewness observed in the untransformed variables had been successfully corrected.

Following this analysis, correlations among the potential predictor variables (i.e., gender, age, level of study, number of units completed and semesters enrolled) and the dependent variables and their component subscales were performed. A correlation matrix of these results is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Correlations Between Potential Predictor and Outcome Variables (N = 74)

	Gender	Age	Study level	Number of units completed	Number of semesters completed
DoS	.052	.277*	.129	.112	.084
ER	.107	.269*	.082	.112	.265*
IP	.113	.090	.161	-.023	-.128
CO	-.014	.136	.067	.010	.118
Fusion	-.068	.315*	.081	.110	.124
Quest	.090	-.049	.146	.246*	.262*
Ex Qu	.118	.039	.111	.193	.238*
Doubt	.076	-.027	.177	.287*	.307**
Open Ch	.031	-.120	.069	.119	.096

Dualism	.035	-.150	-.508**	-.091	-.216
Relativism	.096	-.183	.026	.050	.113
Commitment	.063	.141	.086	.115	.049
Empathy	.069	.007	.040	.211	.367**

Note. DoS = Differentiation of Self; ER = Emotional Reactivity; IP = I Position; CO = Emotional Cut-off; Quest = Quest Religious Orientation; Ex Qu = Preparedness to ask existential questions; Doubt = Perception of doubt as positive; Open Ch = Openness to change; * $p < .05$, two-tailed. ** $p < .01$, two-tailed.

Number of Units Studied, Total Semesters Enrolled and DoS

In order to investigate whether the number of units counselling students have undertaken significantly predicts DoS and/or any or all of its component dimensions once other potential contributing factors have been controlled for, a series of five regressions was performed. Age and level of study were entered as the first step of the regression equation, while number of units completed was entered at the second step. DSI-R, ER, IP, EC, and Fusion scores were entered sequentially as the outcome variables. A second series of regression equations was then conducted which differed from the first only in that total semesters enrolled was entered as a predictor variable at the second step of the regression in place of number of units completed.

Only one significant regression equation was identified from this total of ten analyses; namely, when ER was entered as the outcome variable and total semesters enrolled as the predictor variable ($F[3,68] = 3.515$, $p = .021$), where ZF is a test for statistical significance of the regression equation as a whole, indicating that the length of students' enrolment significantly predicts their capacity to manage their emotional reactivity, once the effect of age and level of study had been taken into account. At step 2 of this regression the number of semesters enrolled for accounted for 7.1% ($\Delta R^2 = .071$) of the total variance observed in ER scores, where ΔR^2 is equivalent to the difference between the amount of variance in ER scores attributable only to age and level of study, and the amount of variance in ER scores resulting from age, level of study *and* number of semesters of enrolment. Results of this regression equation is summarised below in Table 2.

Table 2

Summary of Hierarchical Multiple Regression Predicting Emotional Reactivity from Age, Level of Study and Number of Semesters Completed (N = 74)

Variables	B	SE B	b
Step 1			

Age	.182	.091	.246*
Level of study	.315	2.362	.016
Step 2			
Age	.155	.209	.209
Level of study	1.021	2.307	.053
Number of semesters enrolled	.305	.129	.270*

Note. B =unstandardised regression coefficient, SE B=standard error estimate of B, β = the standardised regression coefficient (slope of the regression line). At step 1, R^2 (adj.)= .036. At the final block, $\Delta R^2 = .071$, $F(3,68) = 3.515$, $p < .05$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Number of Units Studied, Total Semesters Enrolled and Religious Questing

A further two series of regressions were then conducted to ascertain whether the number of units students have completed and/or the total number of semesters of enrolment significantly predicted Quest and any or all of its component subscales, once level of study had been screened for. In the first set of calculations level of study and either number of units completed or total number of semesters enrolled were entered at steps 1 and 2 of the regression. Level of study and total semesters of enrolment were entered at steps one and two of the second set of equations. Quest, readiness to ask existential questions, perception of doubt as positive, and openness to change scores were the designated outcome variables in each case.

On this occasion four significant regression equations were identified with number of units completed and total semesters of enrolment each significantly predicting both Quest and perception of doubt as positive, but not readiness to ask existential questions or openness to change scores. At step 2 of the significant regressions number of units completed contributed 6.2% ($\Delta R^2 = .062$) and 9.7% ($\Delta R^2 = .097$) respectively of Quest and perception of doubt as positive scores, while total semesters of enrolment accounted for 7.2% ($\Delta R^2 = .072$) and 9.9% ($\Delta R^2 = .099$) respectively of the same two outcome variables. These results are summarised in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3

Summary of Hierarchical Multiple Regressions Predicting Religious Questing and Perception of Doubt as Positive from Level of Study and Number of Semesters Completed (N = 74)

	Religious Questing		Perception of doubt as positive	
Variables	b	ΔR^2	b	ΔR^2

Step 1				
Level of study	.146	.008	.177	.018
Step 2				
Level of study	.157		.189	
Number of semesters enrolled	.268*	.072	.314**	.099

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$; β = the standardised regression coefficient (slope of the regression line), ΔR^2 = total variance attributable to number of semesters enrolled at step 2 of the regression.

Table 4

Summary of Hierarchical Multiple Regressions Predicting Religious Questing and Perception of Doubt as Positive from Level of Study and Number of Units Completed (N = 74)

	Religious Questing		Perception of Doubt as Positive	
Variables	b	ΔR^2	b	ΔR^2
Step 1				
Level of study	.146	.008	.177	.018
Step 2				
Level of study	.165		.199	
Number of units completed	.257*	.062	.301**	.097

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. β = the standardised regression coefficient (slope of the regression line), ΔR^2 = total variance attributable to number of units completed at step 2 of the regression.

Number of Units Studied, Total Semesters Enrolled and ED

Finally, in order to examine the relationship between number of units undertaken and total semesters of enrolment and each of the four stages of ED identified by Erwin (1983) once age and level of study had been taken into account, age and study level (step 1) and number of units completed or total semesters of enrolment (step 2) were regressed in turn against the following four outcome variables: Dualism, Relativism, Commitment and Empathy. Two of the

eight analyses yielded statistically significant regression equations: 1) total semesters of enrolment negatively predicted levels of Dualism ($F(2, 71) = 16.221, p = .019$); and 2) total semesters of enrolment positively predicted Empathy scores ($F(2, 71) = 5.652, p = .001$). At step 2 of these equations the predictor variable accounted for 5.6% ($\Delta R^2 = .056$) and 13.6% ($\Delta R^2 = .136$) of the respective outcome variables. Results of the two significant regressions are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Summary of Hierarchical Multiple Regressions Predicting Dualism and Empathy from Level of Study and Number of Semesters Completed (N = 74)

Variables	Dualism		Empathy	
	b	ΔR^2	b	ΔR^2
Step 1				
Level of study	-.508**	.248	.040	.012
Step 2				
Level of study	-.517**		.054	
Number of semesters enrolled	-.236*	.056	.369**	.136

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. β = the standardised regression coefficient (slope of the regression line), ΔR^2 = total variance attributable to number of semesters completed at step 2 of the regression.

Discussion

The first stated hypothesis tested in this study (i.e., that the length of enrolment time and number of units completed by CHC counselling students would positively predict levels of DoS and its component subscales) was not supported overall with only total semesters of enrolment being found to significantly relate to one subscale of DoS – Emotional Reactivity. Number of units undertaken failed to predict DoS or any of its component dimensions at a significant level, while total semesters of enrolment was not significantly predictive of DoS, IP, EC or Fusion.

The precise reason for this overall lack of relationship between students' involvement in study to become counsellors and increases in their self-differentiation as measured by the DSI-R is not clear. What is notable, however, is that there is surprisingly little reference in the counselling literature concerning the effect of counselling training on trainees' levels of DoS.

This makes it impossible to ascertain whether the results of this study are particular to counselling students at CHC or reflect a more general lack of relationship between counselling training and increased levels of self-differentiation.

However, an inventory of both CHC's counselling programs (i.e., the Master of Counselling and Bachelor of Social Science [Counselling]) indicate that neither program includes a particular or intentional focus on DoS, how it occurs, or why it may be important, with the exception of two elective units in the Master of Counselling (i.e., HB462 Advanced Group Processes and HB454 Approaches to Couple Counselling) and one elective in the Bachelor's degree (HB262 Group Processes). Of the 74 counselling students who took part in this study, less than 10% had completed either or both of these units at the time they were surveyed. It is possible therefore that the identified lack of relationship between studying counselling at CHC and levels of DoS are the result of a lack of direct and intentional engagement in the course with the concept of DoS or why it may be of value to counsellors in training.

This finding also suggests that CHC's counsellor training programs may benefit from a greater amount of specific content dedicated to assisting students understand and develop in their own level of self-differentiation. Theorists including the founder of Family Systems theory, Murray Bowen (1978), and author of ***Constructing The Sexual Crucible: An Integration of Sexual and Marital Therapy*** (1991), David Schnarch, argue that the degree of counsellor differentiation is an important factor in therapeutic outcomes, especially in the field of relationship counselling. The PACFA *Training Standards of 2012*, while making no specific mention of DoS, appear to support the general importance of encouraging healthy differentiation in students of counselling, stating that trainees should "demonstrate self-awareness (and) ... relational capacity" (p.2), two of the key dimensions of DoS. Therefore, as a result of these findings a specific review of CHC's counselling programs prior to the next accreditation period in 2016 is being considered with the specific purpose of determining whether a greater focus on the theory and process of self-differentiation is warranted.

However, the finding that the total number of semesters that students enrol in a CHC counselling course positively predicts trainee capacity to regulate their emotional reactivity is an important and encouraging finding. Unlike DoS in general, both theoretical (Schnarch, 1991) and empirical evidence exists that supports a direct link between a counsellor's capacity to self-soothe or manage affect evoked during therapy and positive outcomes for clients (Gelso, Latts, Gomez, & Fansinger, 2002).

Theorists including Gelso and Hayes (1998) have hypothesised that five personal attributes play a role in the effective management of therapist countertransference. These are the therapist's: a) self-insight; b) self-integration; c) anxiety management (or self-soothing); d) empathy; and e) conceptualizing skills. Gelso et al. (2002) studied 32 trainee-therapists and deemed that subscales for two of these five attributes (i.e., conceptualising skill and, significantly in the context of this study, anxiety management or self-soothing) were positively correlated with positive outcomes in therapy. One possible reason for this apparent relationship between a therapist's capacity to regulate effectively his or her countertransference (including soothing anxiety) and effective therapeutic practice is that it improves the client's perception of the therapeutic alliance, a known factor in predicting positive outcomes in therapy (Rosenberger & Hayes, 2002).

When compared to the more general construct of DoS, a considerable number of units in both the undergraduate and postgraduate CHC counselling programs include elements that address directly the topic of trainee's learning to identify and manage their own emotional reactivity, providing a possible explanation for the findings of this study.

In contrast to the first hypothesis, the second hypothesis interrogated in this study (i.e., the length of enrolment time and number of units completed by CHC counselling students will positively predict levels Quest and its component subscales) was largely supported with both levels of Quest and perception of doubt as positive, proving to be positively predicted by number of units undertaken and semesters of enrolment once age and level of study had been taken into account. Perhaps this is not surprising given the highly religious nature of the sample, all of which identified with the Christian faith tradition and over 90 per cent of whom regularly participated in religious activities. In addition, both the Master of Counselling and Bachelor of Social Science (Counselling) programs at CHC include specific dedicated units with a faith-related dimension (e.g., CS200 Christianity and Worldviews in the undergraduate degree and CO415 Theology, Worldview and Counselling in the postgraduate program) which explicitly encourage student engagement with existential questions related to spirituality in general and the Christian faith in particular.

Given the strong relationship that exists between Quest and a wide range of pro-social attributes, including tolerance, compassion and altruism (Majerus & Sandage, 2010) and a lack of prejudice towards members of minority groups (e.g., [Batson et al., 1999](#)), which align well with the values espoused by the PACFA *Code of Ethics* (2012), it can be argued that the suggested effectiveness of CHC's counselling program in facilitating increased levels of Quest in trainees is an important finding. This may be especially true given the tendency of more conservative Christian traditions, from where many of CHC's students originate, to be less tolerant of certain groups within society including individuals from other ethnic or religious groups ([Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005](#)) or members of the Gay, Lesbian and B-sexual and Transgender [GLBT] community ([Marsiglio, 1993](#)), and to be less likely to encourage questioning and discussion of existential concerns ([Hunsberger, Alisat, Pancer, & Pratt, 1996](#)).

Perhaps the most significant finding of this study, however, was the relationship between participation in CHC's counselling courses and its impact on ED. Results from this research generally, but not completely, supported the third and final hypothesis – that length of enrolment time and number of units completed by CHC counselling students would negatively predict earlier stages of ED (e.g., Dualism) but be positively associated with later stages (e.g., Commitment and Empathy).

The finding that both number of units undertaken and total number of semesters of enrolment were negatively associated with Dualism, or 'black and white' ways of understanding the world, was consistent with the results of previous studies dating back to the original work of [Perry \(1970\)](#) that tertiary study is one of the most effective ways to facilitate student maturation of this type. Similarly, given that empathy has been recognised as a core component of counselling practice since at least the time of Carl Rogers (1957) and comprises an important focus of most counselling training programs including those at CHC ([Winkelman, 2010](#)), it is not surprising that trainee's empathetically-based 'ways of knowing' increased the longer they were enrolled in their studies. This is also an encouraging and

important finding considering that practitioner empathy has been shown to be a moderate but highly consistent predictor of positive therapeutic outcomes in dozens of empirical studies (see Norcross, 2010).

What is not clear, however, is why the quantity of counselling training predicted Empathy but not the other higher level ED stage comprising Erwin's model, namely Commitment, as measured by the SID-II, in partial contradiction of the study's third hypothesis. Erwin originally conceptualised the Commitment scale of the SID-II as representative of the hypothetical ED stage of the same name proposed by Perry, based on interviews with male university students only (Erwin, 1983). Therefore, it is possible that SID-II items used to quantify the Commitment subscale are more representative of the 'individual' pattern of knowledge construction identified by Baxter Magolda (1992) as common to many men at this ED stage, rather than the more collaborative 'interindividual' process more often used by women. Given that 85% of participants in this study were women, perhaps the third subscale of the SID-II failed to adequately capture the epistemological Commitment stage characteristic of the majority of this population even when it was present.

In contrast, as discussed above, the final stage of Erwin's (1983) ED model (i.e., Empathy) as measured by the SID-II, appears reasonably analogous to Baxter Magolda's (1992) ultimate epistemological position, *contextual knowing*, which does not appear to be influenced by gender. Therefore, it is possible that the positive relationship between Empathy scores and amount of counselling training that was identified by this research is a result of the Empathy subscale of the SID-II being a more valid measure of higher levels of ED in woman, who comprised most of the participants in this study, than is the Commitment subscale.

A second possible reason that the quantity of training completed by students at CHC predicted SID-II Empathy but not Commitment scores is similar to that of the similar finding relating to DoS, described above; namely, that CHC's counselling programs emphasise the ED of trainees in terms of their capacity for empathetic but not committed styles of knowing. Indeed consideration of the structure and sequence of both CHC's postgraduate and undergraduate counselling courses suggests that this may indeed be the case. Consistent with common and long-held conventions in counsellor training (e.g., Winkelman, 2010), both CHC's Bachelor of Social Science [Counselling] and Master of Counselling include a number of units at both undergraduate (e.g., CO160 Attending to the Human Story) and postgraduate level (e.g., CO460 Connecting with the Human Story) that are intentionally designed to develop student empathetic knowing of self and others.

However, units that are intended to facilitate epistemological commitment in terms of student adherence to specific philosophies and models of therapeutic theory and practice do not appear in course sequences until close to the end of both programs. Not surprisingly therefore, given that this study employed current CHC counselling students, only approximately 5% of participants had completed these 'capstone' units (e.g., CO363 Reflective Counselling Practice and CO570 Practice Reflection Integration IV: Personal Practice Perspective at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels respectively), at the time of data collection. Thus, observed growth in respondents' Empathy but not Commitment SID-II levels may reflect the nature of the units they had completed when the study was conducted.

Initially this explanation appears at odds with Erwin's (1983) original conception of his model of ED, specifically that Empathy represents a superordinate stage to Commitment. Given that Erwin's approach to ED represents a stage-related model, we would not expect to see growth in the students' final stage of ED (i.e., Empathy) before it was observed in their Commitment levels, as was the case in this study. However, as Erwin (1983) originally reported (and was also observed in this study), a significant degree of positive covariation exists between the Empathy and Commitment subscales as measured by the SID-II. Therefore, as Olney and Grande (1995) observe, it is possible that Commitment and Empathy as described by Erwin's model of ED, actually represent two related but distinguishable processes of ED. If this is the case, it indeed seems possible that participants' ED, as it relates to empathetic or contextual knowing, could have increased as a result of the training they received without it necessarily impacting their Commitment scores. Further research involving students at the time of their graduation when they have completed all of the units that comprise the CHC counselling degrees is required before this possibility can be more thoroughly interrogated.

Also worth noting is the finding that overall the total number of semesters students were involved in the study of counselling was a more significant predictor of their intrapersonal, spiritual and epistemological maturation than was the total numbers of units of study they had completed. Not only was the total number of semesters of enrolment significantly associated with a greater number of outcome variables, but it was also a more powerful predictor of those constructs for which number of units was also a predictor (i.e., Quest and perception of doubt as positive). This observation suggests that time involved in the study of counselling is a more important factor than the amount of counselling-related material studied in facilitating the maturation and development of trainees. This finding provides general support for the position of the PACFA *Training Standards of 2012* that counselling training programs must be undertaken over a period of no less than two years at postgraduate level or three years for undergraduates (PACFA, 2012).

Limitations of this study

This research possessed several limitations that should also be noted. In particular the study involved a comparatively small number of participants from one faith-based counselling training institution, making it difficult to determine the reliability or generalisability of the findings. Further research conducted with larger and more diverse populations of counselling trainees from a broader range of training institutions is required before more definite conclusions can be drawn as to the efficacy of counselling training in facilitating student growth and maturation in areas including DoS, Quest and ED.

In addition, the research design used in this study (i.e., a cross-sectional, correlational approach) possesses several important potential limitations. In particular it is possible that findings have been influenced by potential confounding factors which were not controlled for as part of the research. For example, students who took part in the study first enrolled at CHC at different times, ranging from 2007 to 2012. During this time both the Master of Counselling and Bachelor of Social Science (Counselling) programs at CHC underwent modest but significant changes in terms of structure, assessment, emphasis and lecturing personnel due to changes in staff and quality assurance and reaccreditation related reviews. This means that the 74 students who took part in the study had slightly different experiences of the programs in which they were enrolled. In addition the relative proportion of study undertaken by different

participants in on-campus classes or as external students was not taken into account. In order to address this limitation a longitudinal study in which a single group of counselling trainees are followed over the course of four semesters in terms of their levels of DoS, Quest and ED is being considered. Such an approach should effectively control for the potential confounding factors which were present in the current study.

One important question which was not addressed in this research, and which could form the basis for future investigation, relates to what it was about CHC counselling programs that were effective and ineffective in facilitating the various growth (or lack thereof) in the range of psychological constructs examined, as well as how this growth, where present, progresses. Although, initial support for the effectiveness of our counselling programs in promoting student development has been provided from this study, it remains unclear which specific elements, practices, approaches, personnel and experiences inherent to the programs actually facilitate positive learning and change. Such questions may be better answered by conducting qualitative research in the future which seeks to better understand and describe the diverse experiences of the counselling trainees who enrol in our programs.

Conclusions

Despite its limitations, this study represents an important contribution to the counselling literature pertaining to the training of future practitioners. In particular it is one of the few studies to use quantitative data to investigate the efficacy of specific counselling programs in facilitating the intrapersonal, interpersonal, spiritual and epistemological development of counselling trainees – important stated goals of many professional counselling accrediting bodies including PACFA (PACFA, 2012). Findings supported the general effectiveness of the counselling degrees at one Australian faith-based higher education provider (CHC) in promoting several important aspects of student growth including managing emotional reactivity and questing spirituality, as well as decreasing dualistic thinking and increasing empathy. However, results failed to identify a relationship between counselling training and several other potentially important developmentally-orientated psychological constructs including self-differentiation. Although further research involving larger numbers of counselling trainees from more diverse backgrounds and training institutions is required before more definite conclusions can be drawn, this study does provide encouraging initial support that counselling programs of the kind offered by CHC facilitate growth and maturation amongst trainees in areas that are considered important to the counselling profession.

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