

# What to change about the admissions process for doctoral programmes in counselling psychology from the perspective of applicants

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Applicant voices have been absent from research on admissions in counselling psychology programmes. The purpose of this study was to obtain feedback that can inform needed revisions to application requirements and admissions procedures. We distributed an online survey to all counselling psychology doctoral students in Canada, asking what they would change about the admissions process that they experienced. Responses from 49 currently enrolled students, representing about 28% of the entire population of currently enrolled students, were obtained and analysed using inductive content analysis. Responses were grouped into five categories: (i) 'Revise considerations for evaluating applicants'; (ii) 'Introduce interactions with programme members'; (iii) 'Streamline the admissions process'; (iv) 'Improve clarity and communication'; (v) and 'Change financial policy'. This is the first study to investigate the perspective of applicants to counselling psychology programmes and offers a type of experiential data completely neglected in counselling psychology programme admissions research. The results can be used to inform admissions committees in updating outdated requirements and procedures to be more research-informed. We suggest providing applicants with a clearer rationale for admissions requirements, for admissions committees across programmes to better align admissions requirements, and to promote open- houses for applicants to meet faculty and students.

Keywords: counselling psychology; counselling psychology admission; graduate school admission; psychology; student feedback

Admissions committees for training programmes in counselling psychology have long sought to select the 'best' applicants for their programmes (Alexander et al., 2002). This is a critical responsibility for several reasons. First, counselling psychologists can work with highly marginalised segments of society who have already been significantly harmed. Therefore, in light of the need to adhere to ethical gatekeeping, accepting students who pose minimal risk of harm to the population and significant likelihood of benefit is paramount and therefore should be a key consideration in admissions. Second, admitting applicants who will have pronounced difficulties or who will be unable to successfully meet the programme's training outcome goals can become a large time and energy burden on programme faculty and often other students, and takes valuable limited growth-promoting resources away from others. Therefore, admitting students who are most likely to succeed should not only reduce attrition and failure rates but also ensure that scarce resources are used in the most efficient and effective way possible. Third, after an applicant is admitted, there is a considerable investment of money from both the student and university. Considering this era of financial accountability, programmes (and students) in counselling psychology should seek to maximise return on investment in a manner that is financially judicious. Clearly, admissions for counselling psychology programmes should be taken very seriously and be evidence-based.

Given the high stakes, great time demands, and resource commitment required of both applicants and faculty, it is surprising how little empirical research and peer-reviewed academic scholarship has been devoted to the counselling psychology programme application process. There exist few research studies examining the adequacy, reliability, and predictive validity of counselling psychology doctoral programme application requirements and outcomes, disaggregated from general graduate programmes in psychology (most of which are research programmes rather than scientist-practitioner or practitioner-scholar programmes) or from clinical and other applied professional areas of psychology (which subscribe to somewhat different values and priorities; see Alexander et al., 2002). The scarce peer-reviewed published literature that is counselling psychology-specific (Alexander, 2002; Bonifazi et al., 1997; Holmes, 1982; Kopala et al., 1995; Littleford et al., 2018; Loewy et al., 2009; Norcross et al., 2010, 2014; Purdy et al., 1989) seems to have all been conducted in the US. All of it has focused on the perspective and experiences of programme faculty, either directly (by using them as research participants) or indirectly (focusing on programme administration and programme variables). The voices of applicants are conspicuously absent in the literature, and therefore not able to scientifically influence evidence-based decision-making in admissions.

Systematic feedback, such as that which can be provided by applicants, is important for quality assurance and continuous quality improvement in admissions. Without feedback, change and innovation is hampered, which could partly explain why counselling psychology admissions has not changed much in over 20 years (for example, Alexander et al. (2002) and Littleford et al. (2018) found almost identical admissions criteria and application requirements in counselling psychology programmes nearly 20 years apart, despite large institutional, educational, sociocultural and ideological shifts in society over this time period. A call for change is about more than simple modernisation. There are important reasons for programmes to seriously consider revising their admissions processes on the basis of research evidence.

First, it appears that, in admitting students, counselling psychology programmes in Canada (and the US) continue to rely on an incomplete pool of indicators of desired programme outcomes (i.e., limited content validity), including some indicators of questionable predictive validity. For example, they typically rely heavily on classic academic measures such as grade point average (GPA) and Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores (Littleford et al., 2018; Owen et al., 2014). While these are solid predictors of graduate programme grades and of the obtainment of domain-specific knowledge (Smaby et al., 2005), including for racially and ethnically diverse individuals (Kuncel et al., 2001), they show mixed and often low predictive validity for trainee skills and personal development (Smaby et al., 2005) – two integral elements of counselling psychology training. As another example, interviews, which can be costly and time-consuming, are highly relied upon in counselling psychology admissions, at least in the US (Littleford et al., 2018; Owen et al., 2014). This is despite dubious predictive validity, especially if they are unstructured (Owen et al., 2014). This is also in light of claims that initial interviewer impressions could partly be a function of implicit racial/cultural bias or of the large number of general social-cognitive biases present in most individuals (e.g., confirmation bias, availability heuristic; see Owen et al., 2014). Therefore, the admissions process can be improved by eliminating application requirements with little predictive validity, such as reference letters (Owen et al., 2014), and adding in ones that better predict a wide range of programme outcomes, especially student skill development. Additional research (both exploratory and confirmatory) on admissions is therefore needed to make progress in increasing the content and predictive validity of application requirements and selection procedures. For content validity in particular, stakeholders not typically consulted (e.g., applicants) could help identify novel considerations and expand the pool of indicators programmes can select from in making admissions decisions.

Second, there have been longstanding calls for counselling psychology programmes to infuse the profession's core diversity values and social justice initiatives into the admissions process (e.g., Alexander et al., 2002; Loewy et al., 2009). This is because relying heavily on traditional selection factors like grades and GRE scores has been shown to hinder efforts to admit individuals from many minority groups (US Department of Education, 2012), who seem rarely, if ever, formally consulted, despite their insider perspectives on the impact of their marginalised status on application requirements and selection procedures. As a result, information about how applicants, including those from underrepresented groups, understand and experience the overall admissions process, can help identify barriers and biased elements of the admissions process and ensure better equity in admissions.

Third, there are calls to take on a revolutionary new approach to graduate school admissions. For example, Sternberg et al (2012) called for emphasis on community leadership, and potential for making an impactful difference to society. Therefore, perhaps it is time to move beyond the blind spots and legacies inherited by current programme faculty. Feedback from other stakeholders, such as applicants, holds promise for such advancement.

### **The applicant perspective**

It is important to acknowledge that the direct perspectives of applicants were not solicited in any of the past research studies conducted on counselling psychology admissions cited earlier. Not only do we know very little about the admissions process in counselling psychology in general, but we also know almost nothing about the contributions that the applicant perspective can make to improving it. Being informed by the applicant perspective in revising or reaffirming application requirements and selection procedures in counselling psychology is important for several reasons. First, the counselling psychology value of inclusivity means including the perspective of all others involved yet investigations have solely focused on the faculty/programme perspective – despite students being the intended recipients and 'consumers' of counselling psychology training programmes. Second, applicants can provide useful critiques of the status quo around areas like, for example, clarity of application materials requested, usefulness of particular requirements, race/ethnicity-infused barriers to the particular requirements and procedures, quality/quantity/responsiveness of communication from programmes, and transparency about the importance afforded to certain criteria and about decision-making processes. In their feedback, applicants might suggest innovative application requirements that they believe are more valid or reflective of their worth as prospective students, re-affirm application requirements they see value in, and repudiate those that they do not. Therefore, including the perspective of applicants can overcome faculty blind spots and could lead to innovative ideas in revising application requirements or selection procedures that can lead to more satisfied students, which in turn, promotes better student outcomes (Hatcher et al., 1992). Third, action by admissions committees based on better matching applicant values, on how to increase applicant satisfaction, and on how to minimise key applicant barriers to applying, can result in larger applicant pools. This will afford programmes greater selectivity in choosing the 'best' applicants for their particular programme.

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this exploratory study was to address the paucity of research on admissions in counselling psychology doctoral programmes from the perspective of the applicant and better understand the experiences and understandings of applicants to counselling psychology programmes. Specifically, applicants to doctoral counselling psychology programmes in Canada were asked, in completely open-ended manner, if there was anything they wished was different about the admissions process they experienced. Given that this was the first study of its kind, a parsimonious, face valid approach is desirable to open up this new avenue of research. Without this self-report feedback, counselling psychology programmes will remain uninformed about the perspective and lived experience of applicants to their programmes – key stakeholders in counselling psychology training.

### **The Canadian psychology context**

This study collected data from a sample of applicants to Canadian counselling psychology doctoral programmes. The much smaller size of the applicant pool in Canada facilitates sampling a much greater proportion of the population, increasing the likelihood of more representative sampling and reducing sampling biases that are more likely to be present when trying to reach a much larger population of counselling psychology applicants, such as that in the US. Therefore, some background information about the Canadian context is useful. Because the vast majority of research on counselling psychology has been

conducted solely in the US, and readers are likely most familiar with it, comparisons to the US are provided to situate the Canadian context.

There are currently five nationally-accredited doctoral programmes in counselling psychology in Canada (accredited by the Canadian Psychological Association [CPA]) and all are PhD programmes. There are currently an estimated 176 students<sup>1</sup> enrolled in CPA-accredited doctoral programmes in counselling psychology at any one time. On average, each year, Canadian doctoral programmes in counselling psychology receive about 19 applications each (Bedi, 2016). Acceptance rates are about 28% for Canadian programmes, admitting about 26 students total per year (Bedi, 2016). Estimates of the attrition rate from accredited counselling psychology programmes in Canada range from 4.5% to 12% (Bedi, 2016; Bedi et al., 2012), which is substantially higher than the 2% estimated for American Psychological Association (APA) accredited programmes (APA, 2019). In addition, compared to both US counselling psychology and Canadian clinical psychology programmes, Canadian counselling psychology programmes demonstrate much lower Association of Psychology Postdoctoral and Internship Centers (APPIC) internship match rates (APA, 2019; Bedi, 2016; Bedi et al., 2012), and this could at least partially be a function of the particular students admitted under current selection procedures. Furthermore, in Canada, first-time Examination for Professional Practice in Psychology (EPPP) pass rates for doctoral counselling psychology students (75.90%) are significantly lower (with a large effect size) than doctoral clinical psychology students (91.4%; Bedi et al., 2012). Data (Bedi et al., 2012) also indicate that only about 80% of graduates of PhD programmes in counselling psychology in Canada go on to become licensed psychologists, despite graduating with eligible degrees (Bedi, 2016).

Based on the data presented, it appears that Canadian counselling psychology programmes in particular, at least compared to counselling psychology programmes in the US and clinical psychology programmes in Canada, have more room for improvement in selecting better fitting and higher performing applicants by the outcome metrics of attrition rates, APPIC match rates, and EPPP pass rates. Therefore, Canadian counselling psychology programmes may especially benefit from any data that could be used to further improve their application process and selection procedures, such as feedback from applicants, in order to select the 'best' applicants.

## METHOD

### Participants

Forty-nine individuals participated. Participants were counselling psychology doctoral students admitted to one of the five CPA-accredited PhD programmes in Canada (including the University of Toronto, which relatively recently became a combined counselling/clinical psychology doctoral programme but received initial accreditation as a counselling psychology doctoral programme and remained that way for about a decade). Through calling programme representatives, we determined that the population size at time of data collection was 176 students (37 at McGill University, 32 at University of Alberta, 40 at University of British Columbia, 32 at University of Calgary, and 35 at University of Toronto). This sample represents a 27.8% response rate of the entire population of doctoral students in counselling psychology in Canada at the time of data collection.

While 13 participants responded that they would not change anything about the application and admissions process that they experienced, 36 (73.4%) provided one or more pieces of feedback. The demographics of those who offered feedback on something they would prefer to be changed are provided below. These participants comprised 74.3% self-identified females, 22.9% males and 2.8% another gender (excluding one participant who chose not to answer this question). Excluding one participant who elected not to answer, 65.7% of the sample were married or partnered, and 34.3% were unpartnered. The average age was 30.37 ( $SD = 4.49$ ) with a minimum of 24 and a maximum of 45. In terms of residence prior to enrolment in their doctoral programme, noting one participant chose not to answer, 34.3% were from Alberta, 28.6% from British Columbia, 17.1% from Ontario, 8.6% from Quebec, a total of 5.7% from all other provinces in Canada, and a total of 5.7% of individuals previously residing outside Canada (namely the US and China).

Sample representation was obtained from all counselling psychology programmes in Canada. In terms of their doctoral programme on enrolment for sampled participants, 36.1% were from the University of Alberta, 19.4% from the University of British Columbia, 16.7% from both the University of Calgary and the University of Toronto, and 11.1% were from McGill University (adding to 100.1% due to rounding). The median participant was in the second year of their doctoral programme with the mode being first year. Therefore,

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<sup>1</sup> Calculated based on e-mail correspondence with staff from all five programmes.

most who self-selected to participate in this research study were those most recently admitted to doctoral programmes in counselling psychology in Canada, and therefore those who could speak best to contemporary practices in counselling psychology admissions and with the least natural memory decay.

### **Questionnaire**

A face-valid, open-ended question was created and piloted with six current graduate counselling psychology students resulting in minor revisions to wording to improve clarity and conciseness. The final question used in the study read, 'If you could change anything about the doctoral student admissions process for the counselling psychology program(s) in Canada to which you applied, what would you change?' Applicants were provided an open-ended response box to answer with space to offer as much feedback as they wished (i.e., they could provide multiple answers).

### **Procedure**

This study received behavioural research ethics approval from the institutional review board of the two authors. Access to the entire population of interest was available. The questionnaire was sent to every enrolled doctoral student in counselling psychology in Canada by e-mail three times within a four-month period. One or more individuals at each doctoral programme in counselling psychology in Canada who had access to the doctoral student listserv for their programme distributed an online survey request e-mail with a link to the questionnaire. The study was further advertised through (a) the listserv of the Section on Counselling Psychology of the CPA, (b) the student Facebook page of this Section, (c) the CPA's online research recruitment portal, and (d) the newsletter of the Section on Counselling Psychology. Participant responses were anonymous. Informed consent involved an online informed consent form followed by the instructions that if the prospective participant hits 'next' to go onto the survey and completes it, then they are considered to have provided informed consent. This protects the anonymity of the participants as no personally-identifying information needs to be collected. Participants were entered in a draw to receive one of 14 gift cards to restaurants: one \$35, five \$15, and eight \$10 gift cards.

### **Data analysis**

Given the desire to list and quantify concrete feedback in order to increase practical value of the results for counselling psychology admissions committees, an inductive content analysis was used to analyse participant responses (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Creating the category names through review of the text rather than using an a priori categorisation scheme (i.e., inductive content analysis) is recommended for situations where there are no previous studies dealing with the phenomenon (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

The primary analysis team was composed of the second author and a research assistant. Both were males of European descent. The second author has experience unsuccessfully applying to doctoral programmes in both counselling and clinical psychology in the US and the research assistant plans to soon apply to graduate programmes in counselling psychology in Canada. Both were motivated to join the research team to strengthen their graduate school applications, to gain deeper knowledge about graduate programmes they could potentially apply to, and to achieve deeper insight into the graduate school application process. Prior to data analysis, the two analysers discussed their initial impressions, assumptions, and experiences pertaining to applying to graduate programmes in counselling psychology. This was done to become better aware of each other's potential biases that could unduly influence data analysis; and that could be brought up later during coding consensus meetings for examination of unwarranted influence or confirmation bias. After this, both coders independently read all the participant responses four times in order to become highly immersed in the data.

The primary units of analysis for coding were surface-level explicit semantic content (i.e., manifest content) in participants' responses to the question. Each analyser first independently formulated an initial set of codes through open coding to assign as many codes as were deemed necessary for capturing the variety of responses. Next, the two coders met and compared their two sets of codes. When differences were found, they discussed how and why they coded as they did, critiqued the labels for each code, and came to a consensus through debate and discussion, resulting in one unified set of coded data. The analysers then sought to independently organise codes into categories based on interpretation of conceptual similarity between codes. After categorising independently, they compared categories and rationales, and came to a consensus on category composition, category names, and brief definitions. The analysers then engaged in negative case analysis, reading back over all the participant responses again and identifying responses that did not fit the category list/definitions very well, modifying category names, codes, and their assignment

until both deemed the codes and categories to sufficiently fit the data. Exemplars for each category were then identified. Throughout this whole analysis process, both analysers reflexively journaled and shared how they believed their initial impressions, assumptions, and own experiences could be influencing their coding – a process that assists with bracketing, critical thinking, and remaining data-driven during coding (Fischer, 2009). For example, both coders were mindful about how they could unintentionally impose their own specific preferences as applicants onto the data and the second author was watchful about the possibility of over projecting his own extreme frustration with the doctoral programme application process onto the participants' comments.

To further bolster the trustworthiness of the analysis, the analysers maintained an audit trail including the coded data of both analysers before seeking a consensus and a record of the reasoning for each decision that was made in coming to a consensus concerning codes and categories. At this point, the first author, a male associate professor of counselling psychology, who had remained unaware of participant answers and uninvolved in the data coding process, served as an auditor. Before providing feedback, the first author reviewed the participant responses to become familiar with the raw data; checked the audit trails for methodological integrity, coherence and reasonableness; and examined the categories and their codes for cohesiveness and representation of the original participant responses. In areas where the audit raised questions or required additional information, those steps in the analysis process were revisited and redone until the auditor was satisfied that the coding results comprehensively represented original responses in a legitimate and consistent manner.

## RESULTS

Of the 49 participants, 26.5% ( $n = 13$ ) explicitly stated that there was nothing that they wished to change (e.g., 'I don't think I would change anything about the admissions process', 'I thought it was reasonable and can't think of anything I would change', 'I would not change a thing', 'Nothing, I thought it worked well'). In contrast, 73.5% ( $n = 36$ ) offered feedback on at least one aspect of the admissions process that they wished was different. These 36 participants provided 46 different pieces of feedback ( $M = 1.28$ ;  $SD = 0.51$ ;  $\text{min} = 1$ ,  $\text{max} = 3$ ).

The 46 items were summarised into 19 different consensual content analysis codes (representing conceptually identical responses), which then were subsequently grouped into five higher-order consensual categories: (a) revise considerations for evaluating applicants, (b) introduce interaction with programme members, (c) streamline the admissions process, (d) improve clarity and communication, and (e) change financial policy. The categories, their definitions, codes included within each category, the percent of individuals who contributed a response to that category, and sample quotations are provided in Table I.

Table 1

Participants' response to: 'What you change about admissions?'

Category: Definition	Codes within category (% of responses in category)	Proportion of participants	Example quotations
<p><i>Revise considerations for evaluating applicants</i></p> <p>Suggestion of a change in the basis or relative valuation of factors when selecting students to admit</p>	Do not use the GRE (46.2%)	33.3%	'No GREs (I don't think it gives a stronger indication of student success in the programme).'
	Better consideration of applicant counselling skills (15.4%)		'...there are individuals accepted in a practical-based programmes [sic] with no clinical/relational skills.'
	Deeper vetting of applicants based on applicant goals and interests (7.7%)		'I would place a greater focus on ensuring that students are truly interested in research and the academic practice of psychology in addition to an interest in counselling practice.'
	Add barriers to continuing to PhD at master's institution (7.7%)		'I would possibly disallow the continuation of students from master's into PhD at the same institution without very good justification.'
	More merit-based admissions process (7.7%)		'I found that "being known" by the supervisor was the most important element in being able to get in, and I was at a significant disadvantage... even though I was told I was more qualified. This should change.'
	More weight on extracurricular activities (7.7%)		'I suggest giving more weight to the extracurricular experience the individual has and that pertains to mental health as well as other area [sic].'
<p><i>Introduce interactions with programme members</i></p> <p>Suggestion that applicants and people in the programme have further personal interactions before concluding the admissions process.</p>	More weight on research (7.7%)		'Put more emphasis on research.'
	Include interviews (75%)	33.3%	'There should be an interview to help both sides assess fit.'
	Meet professors before choosing lab (12.5%)		'Open house with potential supervisors indicating what they are working on.'
Bidirectional expression of interest between faculty and students (12.5%)	'If faculty could express interest in working with you (not just the other way around).'		
<p><i>Streamline the admissions process</i></p> <p>Desire that aspects of the admissions process be easier, quicker, or simplified</p>	Standardise admissions processes and materials across programmes (37.5%)	22.2%	'Begin the centralise process [sic]. This may involve schools meeting and devising common admission criteria.'
	Fewer barriers to pursuing PhD based on prior degree subject or location (25%)		'Making it easier to transfer a master's to a doctoral degree across different institutions.'
	Make master's continuous with PhD programme (25%)		'I would prefer if we didn't have to apply again from the MA to the PhD.'

Category: Definition	Codes within category (% of responses in category)	Proportion of participants	Example quotations
	Simpler and less repetitive application questions (12.5%)		'Tighter application questions that aren't repetitive and just get to the point.'
<i>Improve clarity and communication</i>	More information about programmes (55.6%)	22.2%	'More readily accessible information for incoming students applying to programmes (particularly external applicants) – the process is basically shrouded in mystery.'
Desire for more effective or thorough communication of general information or matters of personal pertinence	Improve communication with applicants (44.4%)		'Clearer communication about what is expected to be completed before entering the programme in September, not only by my supervisor but by the administration.'
<i>Change financial policy</i>	No application fee for anyone (50%)		'The fee associated with applying is a deterrent for some to applying to all the school they may hope to attend.'
Recommendation that programmes adopt different procedures concerning fees and financial aid	More immediate funding (25%)	11.1%	'More funding opportunities...'
	No application fee for internal applicants (25%)		'Do not make students pay an application fee to from MA to PhD in the same programme.'



## DISCUSSION

Given the high stakes involved for applicants, universities, and future clientele of counselling psychologists, and the many burdens associated with enrolling poorly fitting or failing students, it is surprising that a more inclusive investigation of the admissions process into counselling psychology programmes has not occurred. Virtually all the research specific to counselling psychology is from the faculty/programme perspective, whether explicitly or implicitly. The perspective of applicants on counselling psychology admissions is conspicuously absent. In the present study, a relatively large sample of applicants to doctoral counselling psychology programmes in Canada was asked, in completely open-ended manner, if there was anything they wished was different about the admissions process they experienced. Investigating the views of applicants not only contributes to the scarce pool of data available to make evidence-based decisions about counselling psychology admissions, but also offers a type of experiential data completely neglected in counselling psychology admissions research. Systematic cross-programme information about the views and experiences of counselling psychology applicants (the recipients of counselling psychology training) can yield useful information that needs to be carefully considered by admissions committees when contemplating changes to admissions processes.

It seems encouraging that nearly 25% of participants stated that there was nothing that they wished was different about their own counselling psychology doctoral programme admissions process. Therefore, there is much that doctoral programmes are currently doing that is satisfying to a sizeable minority of applicants. Nevertheless, the other approximately 75% found room for improvement. The 'silver lining' is that the majority of surveyed applicants only offered one or two points of feedback each; so perhaps programmes are not that far off from making changes that would leave most applicants pleased with the process of their application and admissions.

### **Participant feedback and suggestions for altering the admission process**

Participant feedback on existing considerations for evaluating applicants was primarily focused on the perceived weight given to certain credentials and background. There was variability across participants in the specific changes in application evaluation criteria they desired (e.g., admission committees should more strongly consider applicant's pre-existing counselling skills and extra-curricular activities, more consideration should be given to research background). While these answers could reflect a self-serving bias in that applicants wished that programmes focused more on areas of existing strength for the particular participant, these results can also be looked at, collectively, as an indication of what participants believe are the most important things to consider in admissions. Most commonly, participants commented on extracurricular life experiences, existing counselling competencies, and research achievements and abilities. Notably absent were comments that programmes should place greater weight on mainstay criteria usually relied upon such as grades, GRE scores, reference letters, specific psychology coursework, and the field of an applicant's undergraduate degree. In the minds of some of the participants in this study, these latter elements should not be heavily weighted in admissions decisions and possibly even eliminated, while the former emphasised.

The greatest consensus (46.2%) on an objective application requirement pertained to questioning the relevance of the GRE as an application requirement and for predicting student success in counselling psychology programmes. These applicants may be uninformed about the well-replicated and longstanding high predictive ability of the GRE, at least for course grades and the acquisition of domain-specific knowledge, including with racial and ethnic minority individuals (Kuncel et al., 2001) and including the domain-specific knowledge that undergirds counselling (Smaby et al., 2005). Nonetheless, the GRE is not a good indicator of the development of counselling skills (Smaby et al., 2005), and that might be what these participants were focused on. However, it should go without question that mastery of knowledge and skills are both required in order to graduate and to obtain psychologist licensure. To increase the perceived credibility of the admissions process by applicants, programmes requiring the GRE should consider communicating to applicants, on their websites, the reasons for requiring and evaluating GRE scores, as well as the limits. Based on our findings, some applicants need reassurance that the GRE is not just an irrelevant bureaucratic hurdle to overcome.

This point could be applied to admissions requirements more broadly: programmes should consider presenting clear explanations to applicants about why each element is included in the application process, citing supporting evidence. This practice could not only dispel perceptions of arbitrary imposition on applicants (repeatedly mentioned by participants in this study), but also help socialise incoming students and the larger applicant pool to evidence-based practices and the scientist component of their professional

identity. It can further create a greater sense of accountability by programmes to use criteria consistent with the current evidence base.

Participants also wished for more interaction with faculty and other programme members prior to accepting an admission offer. They specifically mentioned a desire for interviews (which are not commonplace among Canadian programmes; Bedi, 2016), meeting professors they requested to work with in advance, and receiving direct expressions of interest from research supervisors wanting to work with them. What applicants valued about interviews was generally their relational components and helping applicants better assess perceived fit with the proposed supervisor, rather than their role as criteria to assess their abilities, skills, or aptitudes. However, the more cost- and time-efficient open-house should be considered as suitable replacements as interviews, especially if unstructured, have been shown to be highly susceptible to social-cognitive biases (Owen et al., 2014), so they may not be worth the time and labour intensity required. Mandatory in-person interviews can also involve substantial travel costs to applicants.

Participants also expressed frustration at the highly varied application requirements across programmes, which sometimes prevent applicants from applying (Bedi, 2016). For example, across doctoral programmes in Canada, only the University of British Columbia's programme currently requires the GRE and a simulated recording of one's counselling skills. As another example, while all require a master's degree prior to admissions, not all PhD programmes require completion of a master's thesis (Bedi, 2016).

For schools that offer the PhD, the curriculum and programme requirements of MEd/MA/MSc degrees in counselling psychology in Canada are currently geared towards meeting prerequisites for their own PhD programmes in counselling psychology (Wada et al., 2020). Otherwise, for the vast majority of master's programmes, little consideration is given to preparing master's students for PhD study as most master's level counselling psychology programmes in Canada function as terminal master's programmes, similar to all counsellor education master's programmes in Canada (Bedi et al., 2012). This is a barrier that reduces individual programme applicant pools given the greatly incompatible application requirements across programmes throughout Canada (Bedi, 2016). Therefore, it is not surprising that some applicants felt that the transition from master's to PhD should be more efficient. For example, one participant commented that differences in prerequisite credit requirements between this person's master's and PhD institutions caused difficulties for them as an external applicant.

Based on feedback provided by participants, given how few programmes there are (five) and thus how feasible alignment should therefore be, doctoral programmes in counselling psychology in Canada should seriously consider working together to standardise the application requirements, including course prerequisites and applicant background. This could not only reduce unnecessary burden on applicants but promote better interprovincial and cross-programme mobility of applicants across Canada: if an applicant met the background requirements for one doctoral programme they would meet the requirements for all others in Canada, which is definitely not the case at the present time. Standardizing admissions requirements nationally should also increase the number of applicants to each counselling psychology doctoral programme in Canada and perhaps increase the diversity of the applicant pool for all programmes.

Some participants desired improved clarity from programmes. They specifically mentioned the need for additional information about the programme to better inform decision-making. Our own review of the Canadian programme websites indicated notable variability in the type of information provided and extreme variability in the level of detail provided. For example, some programmes provide few, if any, information about student or faculty characteristics or application/admissions statistics on their website, while others list many more. Therefore, we recommend that programmes update their websites with additional and more detailed information about their programmes. In parallel, accreditation bodies (such as the CPA) should consider involving potential applicants in the process of updating and clarifying their requirements for public disclosure, as this is the demographic most interested in such information (Hausman et al., 2017). Some participants also mentioned the need for improved communication from programmes. By this they meant, for example, improved notification about the admissions timeline and communication about their chances of getting into the programme. In terms of financial considerations, various participants recommended that application fees be non-existent for everyone, or at least internal applicants, and commented on the need for more funding to be tied to admissions. Programmes that do not already provide this information and level of responsiveness would be advised to consider doing so if they wished to maximise applicant satisfaction.

## Limitations

First, one ostensible limitation is that the study only solicited the response of 49 students admitted to Canadian counselling psychology doctoral programmes, which seems like a small number. Although our response rate was high relative to research on programme selection in psychology and related fields (e.g. Hertlein & Lambert-Shute, 2007; McIlvried et al., 2010) and our sample size was large relative to published studies surveying graduate students in counselling psychology in Canada (the current study now serves as the second largest survey study of doctoral students in counselling psychology in Canada, eclipsing Bedi et al. [2018a]; the largest is N= 64; Bedi et al., 2019), this study focused on a relatively small population (N = 176 at time of data collection). Therefore, any study of this type in Canada will be necessarily constrained to a maximum of 176 participants or so. This sample size problem will be an inevitable issue for most countries of the world because most countries have few training programmes for counselling psychologists. However, given the small number and student size of Canadian counselling psychology programmes, this results in a very reasonable representation of the entire population of admitted counselling psychology doctoral students in Canada at time of data collection. Based on the population estimate provided by the APA for US programmes (2019), achieving this response rate is equivalent in representation rate to a sample size of 737 students in doctoral programme in counselling psychology in the US.

Second, formal sample representativeness is difficult to fully assess because no programmes in Canada publicly report details on the race and ethnicity of their doctoral students on their website and only two of the programmes provide any information about gender demographics of enrolled students (University of British Columbia, University of Alberta). In this latter regard, our gender distribution is quite comparable to the population gender distribution in these two particular doctoral programmes in counselling psychology. Although we cannot fully rule out that the sample size and response rate contributed to a possible selection bias in the participants used in this study, recruitment contact reached every single enrolled student, responses were obtained from students at all doctoral programme in counselling psychology in Canada, and participants came mostly from the provinces with the largest populations as well as from the provinces that housed doctoral programmes in counselling psychology. This information should provide some degree of confidence in the potential representativeness of the results obtained. Nevertheless, given the varied representation across doctoral programmes among sample participants, we believe that the results of this study perhaps best speak to the University of Alberta's counselling psychology doctoral programme and least to McGill University's programme.

Third, it is important to critically appraise the data source and realise likely biases. The feedback is provided from the applicant's perspective and primarily considers the needs and desires of applicants. Applicants may be uninformed about the value of some application criteria (e.g., GRE) from the programme standpoint. They were not necessarily considering desired outcomes from the programme perspective, but mainly focused on their own personal outcomes or the plight of similar applicants. In addition, we were unable to locate any evidence from psychology or another discipline as to whether revising admissions requirements on the basis of applicant feedback directly results in better student and professional outcomes. It may very well do so, but this is an empirical research question for future research. Nevertheless, student satisfaction seems like a promising mediating variable and there is some past research support for the impact of student satisfaction on programme success (Hatcher et al., 1992). It can also be argued that applicants, who have not entered the field and may have inaccurate or incomplete understandings of counselling psychology as a psychology specialization and profession, may not fully know what is best for the programme, the field, or even themselves (e.g., how well will they fit with counselling psychology versus other psychology specializations). Therefore, although investigating the student perspective is interesting and inclusive, future research should better establish its incremental validity, that is, whether acting on applicant feedback will actually improve the outcomes of a counselling psychology programme above what they are currently at based on faculty understandings. Therefore, we do not advocate for uncritically accepting participant answers and making requisite changes without cross-referencing them with the perspective of other stakeholders and other research evidence. With this said, the applicants who responded to this survey provided some innovative considerations for revising the admissions process. This information should at least be carefully considered by admissions committees if they have the goals of increasing the applicant pool size and hosting more inclusive programmes.

Fourth, in surveying current students, we could only access the perspective of the success stories: those applicants who were actually admitted to a doctoral programme in counselling psychology in Canada. The perspective of applicants not able to obtain admission is also a valuable one. However, accessing this population in any reasonably representative manner and accurately estimating the population size of applicants (in order to determine a response rate) seems virtually impossible, which is why this research is not being done, not only in psychology but also in other disciplines (we only found one small-scale study that was able to compare successful applicants to unsuccessful applicants: Bersola et al., 2014, which did this for all doctoral admissions at one particular university during one application cycle).

Finally, there could be questions about the extent to which these results from Canada will generalise to programmes in other countries. It is quite easy to peruse the admissions criteria for the five Canadian programmes online and it seems pretty clear that they rely on similar application/admissions credentials and processes to those in the US, England, and other Western countries (also see Bedi, 2016 and Littleford et al., 2018). Given the high similarity in doctoral training in counselling psychology across the US and Canada and their accreditation reciprocity agreement (CPA & APA, 2017), as well as documented similarities in the manifestation of counselling psychology in Canada and the UK (Bedi et al., 2018b), we expect that many results of this study will have reasonable generalizability to the admissions situation in the US, the UK, and other Western countries, at least.

Despite these limitations, this study provided the first systematic investigation of the experience and understandings specifically of counselling psychology programme applicants. Applicant understandings about the admissions process to counselling psychology programmes has not been systematically investigated and reported in a peer-reviewed, published, cross-programme aggregate manner until this study. Therefore, this study can provide foundational background and direction for opening up this important and promising avenue of future research.

### **Future research**

It would be useful for future research to replicate this study, especially with a bigger sample size, both in the near future, to increase confidence in the results of the current study, and in the distant future, to track changes over time. A future study that samples across Canada and other countries will also be useful to better determine what results are specific to Canada (and highlight sociopolitical/cultural national influences) and what results truly generalise to the broader counselling psychology specialization globally.

Because the research design employed does not definitively provide for causal relationships, future research can also investigate some of the innovative ideas mentioned by participants in prospective and more controlled research. For example, experimental investigations could examine the influence of receiving written expressions of interest to applicants from prospective supervisors on variables like on applicant satisfaction, enrolled student outcomes, and programme outcomes. Assessing the extracurricular life experiences of applicants as a formally evaluated admissions criteria, perhaps in the manner recommended by Sternberg et al. (2012; focusing on actual and potential community leadership and contributions) might be an especially promising avenue to explore in prospective research in order to promote equity and inclusion of those from commonly marginalised backgrounds.

In addition, future research could complement the current study with the perspective of four other relevant populations. While extremely difficult to obtain, novel feedback and a more thorough understanding of the experience of the applicant admissions process will likely be obtained by also sampling unsuccessful applicants who did not gain admission and those who were dissuaded from even applying in the first place. This could be accomplished in at least two ways. Applicants can be sent an invitation to participate in a study directly from programmes they applied to, but care would have to be taken to protect participant confidentiality, by for example, having the data collected and analysed by an external party. Study recruitment could also occur from students in typical feeder programmes to doctoral programmes in counselling psychology who are in their final year before graduation (who potentially could be applying to programmes in counselling psychology). A study soliciting the perspective of international applicants specifically should also prove to be valuable in informing modifications that could result in the programme admissions process being more welcoming for international students and helping meet any diversity goals related to nationality of students. Finally, utilising samples of just applicants who have a minority or marginalised status, can further identify valuable alterations to admissions processes that could prove to be more inclusive and promote social justice.

### **CONCLUSION**

Due to the absolute absence of systematic research on the admissions process in counselling psychology programme specifically that examines the perspective of applicants, this study should be seen as a valuable, albeit small step forward, and one that can catalyse important progress in future research on admissions processes and practices. In supporting the quest for greater validity in admissions decisions, information such as that which is provided in this study not only contributes to the scarce pool of data available to make evidence-based decisions about counselling psychology admissions but offers a type of experiential data completely neglected in counselling psychology programme admissions research. In other words, the results of this study hold great relevance for informing academic programmes about a neglected perspective that

they can consider as they seek to review and hopefully update their application and selection procedures to be more evidence-based and research-informed. Given the apparent stagnancy in counselling psychology admissions processes, the time for change is now. Although the evidence provided in this study is limited, some evidence is better than no evidence in pursuit of the goal of evidence-based, research-informed decision-making in counselling psychology admissions, particularly when the evidence comes from a never-before investigated but essential stakeholder: the applicant and future student.

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