Counseling in Switzerland:
Past, Present, and Future

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The authors review counseling in Switzerland and compare it with counseling in the United States. They evaluate the role of professional associations and programs and argue that the evolution of counseling is situated within the history and economic, social, and political systems of Switzerland. Findings suggest that Swiss counselors are ready to reach out, evolve, and learn from mental health professionals around the world and to adopt best practices so as to work with those in need.

Keywords: counseling, history, education, services, Switzerland

This article provides a moment to take part in a vision started in the United States 50 years ago when the American Personnel and Guidance Association (APGA) was formed to buttress the profession of counseling. APGA evolved into the American Association of Counseling and Development and then the American Counseling Association (ACA) as its ranks grew in the field. Today, with an identity of its own, counseling is a known, respected U.S. profession distinct from psychology, social work, and psychiatry.

Irrevocably rooted in the rich body of past events in Europe and the United States, counseling in Switzerland is situated within the framework of psychiatry and psychology. As counseling becomes a more sought-after form of intervention in Switzerland, professional clinical counselors are immersed in competition with psychologists, psychiatrists, and other helping professionals for their place. They confront challenges associated with pioneering a new profession as they reflect on questions of definition, training, and accreditation that shape professional identity and distinguish counseling from other forms of psychological help. Therefore, these reflections provide an impetus to counter the dominant conceptual framework of confusion and protectionism present in the helping professions and build a professional voice for the future.

Because of the quadrilingual nature of Switzerland (four national languages including German [64%], French [20%], Italian [7%], and Romansh [0.5%]), counselor education and practice is divided on regional and linguistic interests. Swiss counseling is enriched and at the same time complicated by approaches practiced in neighboring France, Germany, and Italy. The result is indistinguishable relationships between the accrediting organizations with regard to the management and validation of the profession. The outcome is that the moral, existential, legal, and psychological dilemmas continue to be dealt with at a cantonal rather than federal level, a factor that leads to fragmentation.

Tracing the History of Switzerland

Switzerland in its modern form came into being in 1848 when the country became a federal state. With a population of 7 million inhabitants, this small landlocked country located in the heart of Western Europe shares much of its history with its neighbors, Austria, Italy, France, and Germany. The federal constitution defines Switzerland as a state composed of 26 culturally diverse cantons, which are the member states of the federal state of Switzerland. The cantons have far-reaching autonomy and internal rivalries that, from a foreign perspective, beg the question, Why are they part of the same country? However, the closer one sees how the cantons coexist, the more one can observe why the country is successful. It is as if the cantons acknowledge that although they do not necessarily need each other, they know the power of being together (Thomas & Henning, in press).

Swiss cantons are remarkably similar to U.S. states. Both countries have a federal system in which states and cantons have powers that the federal government does not. The unique Swiss form of government—decentralized power—has mechanisms designed to find a compromise in every issue that, if anything, makes Swiss cantons more autonomous than U.S. states. Direct democracy, where citizens vote on issues of importance, provides a high degree of participation in law making and gives diverse views a voice so that the population has high political awareness. The Swiss health care system is divided into 26 cantonal authorities. Cantons differ in policy, legislation, and structure. Health insurance is compulsory, although contributions vary among cantons. A feature of this system is that cantons are thoroughly integrated into the sociocultural context of the country, and there is collaboration between universities and psychiatric services.

Counseling Services in Switzerland

As with other European countries, counseling in Switzerland evolved largely from the work of the clergy, social workers,
nurses, and Christian associations that offered pastoral care to their communities. Examples of internationally renowned Swiss contributors are scholars such as Alexander Müller, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Leonhard Schlegel, and psychologist Carl Jung. Their rich legacy is drawn upon as a foundation by Swiss counselor education programs.

It also seems fitting that the development of the counseling profession in continental Europe should find a home in a country with a proud humanitarian tradition: Switzerland has long been a place of asylum for those persecuted for political reasons. For example, Geneva, the location of one of the first counseling programs, is seen as the capital of human rights. As a meeting place where world leaders gather to negotiate treaties, the city is home to the International Committee of the Red Cross and more than 200 international, United Nations, governmental, and nongovernmental organizations.

In the past decade, a body of skilled counseling professionals trained in private counseling associations and institutes in Zurich, Geneva, and Ticino are illustrative of the growth of counselor education. Institutes have been established in the Swiss German community, and, similarly, the Centro al Dragonato in Bellinzona, Ticino, was formed in 1989. The latter evolved after collaboration between several colleges as part of a research project to promote counselor education and deepen the theoretical models in the fields of rehabilitation and social intervention (Rezzonico & Meier, 2010). Focused on the global perspective that Geneva might add to education, Webster University opened its first European campus in the Swiss Romande city in 1978. In 1997, this Webster campus started the first master of arts in counseling program in English in continental Europe. Some graduates return to the United States to practice, but most serve the international community, which comprises 40% of the Geneva population.

Among practicing counselors are psychiatrists, psychologists, psychoanalysts, and psychotherapists, some with formal training in counseling skills. Sabbadini (2010) argued that standards, training, consistent terminology, legislation, and diplomas awarded still lack homogeneity.

Definitions

Swiss counseling experiences a struggle for recognition. Frustration is fueled by the acknowledgment that when translated into French and German, the word counseling means adviser, a quality not ascribed to as a central methodology. Despite this, as the ambiguity associated with the word is addressed, the term is gaining visibility and acceptance.

The Swiss National Association for Counselling (Associazione Nazionale Svizzera per il Counselling [ANSCo]; n.d.-b) describes counseling as a “relational tool to help people help themselves” (What Is Counselling? section, para. 1). Counselors are professionals who, through their knowledge and skills, can support individuals or groups seeking solutions to psychological discomfort (ANSCo, n.d.-b).

The Swiss Association for Counselling (Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Beratung [SGfB]) considers client issues from the perspective of developmental ruptures and life crises. The counselor’s goal is to enable individuals to handle transitions so that they develop functional self-management and personal growth, and there is more of an emphasis on present and future functioning than on past experiences. Counseling is not pathology oriented but aims to provide largely nondirective support to individuals. Problems are recognized as an opportunity to create a future inclusive of fulfillment and satisfaction (SGfB, n.d.-a).

Many people, at some point, find that the demands of situations exceed the personal and social resources they can mobilize to adjust physically, mentally, or socially to troublesome events. They are neither able to respond adequately and adapt their lifestyles nor thrive without the help of a trained person, often a helping professional.

Relationship to Psychology and Other Helping Professions

Swiss mental health services are characterized by a separation between psychiatry and neurology, with a distinction between pediatricians, psychiatrists, and neuropsychiatrists. Since the end of the 19th century, psychology has largely developed in the fields of clinical—one-to-one interaction—or experimental and developmental psychology with some disregard for the contribution of sociocultural and contextual factors central to individual growth.

In contrast to traditional professions of psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and psychology, the central philosophy of counseling in Switzerland is that individuals have adequate resources to manage their lives but that in a given situation these resources are unavailable. Unlike approaches based on the more traditional pathogenic paradigm, counseling responds to a different philosophical assertion and also to societal changes. Counselors look to mediate between events and the individual and assist the client in discovering his or her growth potential and drive to understand the symbolic meaning of life. Among others, counselors apply cognitive, affective, behavioral, constructivist, or systemic strategies to address issues of wellness and personal growth and then pathology. All the while, counselors pay attention to generating interest in multiculturalism, social justice, and advocacy within a country that has been multicultural in its own way for centuries (Thomas & Henning, in press).

As the profession of counseling forges its way in Switzerland, many counselors start full- or part-time private practices. This professional development is in contrast to that of social workers, who work more closely with state organizations. Until recently, the profession of social work was underdeveloped and without a university chair or a scientific association. In the past 5 years, several new master’s degree programs in social work ensure that the profession aligns with other helping professions.
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Historical Development of Swiss Counseling Associations and Credentialing Agencies

In 1991, the European Association for Counselling (EAC) was founded to support the development and application of counseling across Europe. In 2005 and 2006, two professional counseling bodies, one largely Swiss Italian and the other Swiss German, started in Switzerland. Both aim to ensure compliance with standards on the basis of European and international best practices.

ANSCo, largely Swiss Italian, was founded in 2005. It is a member of EAC and serves as a reference association and a platform for counseling, counselors, and clients looking for support in Switzerland (ANSCo, n.d.-a). Currently, it has more than 75 members, of whom 18 are ANSCo-accredited professional counselors. SGfB, largely Swiss German, was founded in 2006. The Swiss German association emerged as a network of 11 counseling-related training associations and institutions, many private. SGfB defined counseling and developed its statutes, ethical principles, and guidelines. Currently, SGfB has a total of 19 affiliated organizations and more than 100 members (SGfB, n.d.-c).

SGfB’s mandate is primarily to support and train counselors, with a practical emphasis and a strong focus on clinical practice (SGfB, n.d.-b). Many are nurses, clergy members, and individuals who have completed an apprenticeship and are mostly trained externally to the traditional university environment. Extensive, well-regulated, state-controlled apprenticeship programs unique to Switzerland exist as a genuine alternative for nonuniversity graduates. Apprenticeships include approximately 200 professions or trades and last 3 to 4 years. Candidates receive a coveted state diploma upon completion. After an apprenticeship, graduates start work or embark on further education in a technical college or university. Until June 2012, the two professional bodies ANSCo and SGfB were separated. In July 2011, they collaborated in an effort to seek out common ground and in the interest of crafting a strong national counseling association. In June 2012, ANSCo dissolved, and these members now have the opportunity to transfer their membership to SGfB. The essential difference between the two national bodies was philosophical. ANSCo emphasized an academic route through the university graduate system to a counseling qualification, and SGfB emphasized vocational training and an apprenticeship.

When compared with the initial development of American professional counseling associations, organizations in Switzerland such as SGfB and ANSCo have developed counseling (and counselor education) from the established professions of counseling in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. All provide clinical counseling developed from a history of guidance and personnel counseling in the 1950s and 1960s, to community- or agency-type counseling, to its current identity as professional counseling. Specialties are found in school and guidance, couples and family, college and personnel, and clinical counseling (Sabbadini, 2010). Today, three U.S. bodies service more than 45,000 counselors practicing in the United States and 50 other countries, including nations in Europe and Latin America as well as the Philippines and the U.S. Virgin Islands. ACA is the world’s largest private, not-for-profit organization dedicated to providing professional counselors “leadership training, publications, continuing education opportunities, and advocacy services” and helping “counseling professionals develop their skills and expand their knowledge base” (ACA, n.d., para. 2). Among its most important contributions to the profession is the ACA Code of Ethics (ACA, 2005).

A second professional counseling guild is the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC). This guild bounds the profession and, indirectly, counselor education in the United States. It hosts NBCC International (NBCC-I), a division that assists countries to establish the profession worldwide (NBCC-I, 2012). The third is the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). Whereas the ACA Code of Ethics (ACA, 2005) provides practice boundaries for counselors, CACREP provides education and training (supervision) boundaries for counselor educators, program administrators, and supervisors of counselors-in-training in the United States. In 2009, CACREP established the International Registry of Counselor Education Programs (IRCEP). IRCEP is a registry designed to empower countries outside of the United States to develop counselor training programs appropriate to their location, which meet program standards regardless of location (IRCEP, n.d.).

As professional counseling develops in Switzerland, constituents have adopted the foundational documents of ACA, the ACA Code of Ethics (ACA, 2005), and the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP, 2010), in developing their ethical counseling codes. The professional counseling associations and credentialing organizations in the United States are among the most advanced counseling systems in the world (Hohenshil, 2010). Hohenshil (2010) reported that they may be a rich source of information and support for international counseling organizations as they attempt to craft a new profession of counseling and meet their unique cultural needs. Swiss programs benefit from this support and with time may wish to apply for registration with IRCEP.

Current Status of Counseling in Switzerland

Swiss counselors are trained to use a framework that deals with understanding the inner life of the client as a biopsychosocial and spiritual subject. Counselors consult the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th ed., text rev.; American
Psychiatric Association, 2000) and the commonly used alternative, the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems* (10th rev.; World Health Organization, 2010) but are hesitant to routinely apply diagnostic labels. Swiss counselors use this approach in order to be attentive to the social construction of a disease category mind-set and promote a health-driven rather than a pathology-driven orientation.

In Switzerland, psychiatric diagnostic codes add value to the construction of treatment plans; to the provision of consistent structure; and when used as a vocabulary for clinicians, organizations, and insurance companies. However, there is little agreement among local professionals as to the meaning of many terms. Diagnoses may be more political than scientific. A counseling perspective includes a broader notion of relative well-being, hardiness (Kobasa, 1979), perceived self-efficacy or optimistic self-beliefs (Bandura, 1997), positive psychology (Seligman, 2011), cognitive appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1991), and learned resourcefulness (Rosenbaum, 1990). It is noted in the emerging literature that many clients have been poorly served by a clinical framework of people’s experiences that assumes vulnerability at the expense of strength, resilience, community bonds, and an ability to cope (Almedom & Summerfield, 2004). Swiss counseling graduates are trained to recognize that people do not all have the same mental health experience (Rezzonico & Meier, 2010).

Counseling’s contribution is to apply mental health, psychological, and human development principles in the context of communities, hospitals, schools, universities, corporations, religious organizations, and private practices (SABBADINI, 2010). In this way, counselors aim to assist individuals in overcoming the psychological, existential, or emotional discomfort that prevents full and creative expression, and to be a facilitating element in the dialogue between the organization and the person. The client is helped to develop an awareness of resources, to explore new narratives, and to open up fresh scenarios and possibilities. The counselor resists the temptation to give advice but asks appropriate questions; in addition, the counselor does not take responsibility for the client’s choices but instead provides information and orientation.

Counseling is especially useful in times of crisis or change: accidents, trauma, grief, a disability, a terminal illness, the loss of a job or of a family member, and marital problems or relationship breakdowns, all events that can rupture normal life patterns. Other groups with specific counseling needs include those who are socially disadvantaged, humanitarian workers, people with antisocial or offender behaviors, older adults, and individuals with substance abuse problems.

### Quality Control and Accreditation: Emerging Professional Identity and Accreditation

As a means to ensure quality control and a professional identity for counseling in Switzerland, ANSCo and Webster University registered the term ANSCo counsellor in Berne with the Federal Institute of Intellectual Property in 2009. With the trademark, the term ANSCo counsellor determined Swiss national standards for the counseling profession to ANSCo standards. To receive individual ANSCo accreditation, graduates required a master’s-level counseling qualification, at which point they could use the title ANSCo accredited professional counsellor after their name as they secured their professional identity.

SGfB requirements differ. It requires a proposed examination at a federal level under the auspices of the responsible federal body, the Federal Office for Professional Education and Technology (OPET; SGfB, 2012). This examination leads to the advanced federal diploma. It will comprise a written and oral exam and an audio/video tape review. At a final colloquium, candidates will explain their concept of counseling and practice. The federal exam is subject to review by OPET (SGfB, 2012). Once the examination is accepted by the federal office, it will be OPET that will decide on the acceptance of international diplomas and certifications. Counseling will have a federal title if SGfB is successful. The final title will recognize and distinguish counseling from social work, psychology, and psychotherapy.

The examination under the SGfB is expected to result in the title counsellor with advanced federal diploma of professional education and training (Höhere Fachprüfung für Beratung im psychosozialen Bereich). The conditions of admission to this examination require a tertiary education (Tertiärabschluss). A lower examination, resulting in the title supporter/adviser with a competency certificate (Begleiter/Begleiterin von Entwicklungs- und Veränderungsprozessen mit eidg. Fachausweis), will fall under the auspices of the Swiss Coaching Association and SKO-Schweizer Kader Organisation (SGfB, 2012).

### Future Trends and Challenges: The Next 5 to 10 Years

Swiss counseling programs will evolve as the profession looks to meet the demands of individuals seeking services, as training opportunities develop, as the quantity and quality of research grows, and as awareness of the profession spreads. Like many nations new to the practice of counseling, Switzerland may choose to draw on the already established professions of psychotherapy and counseling in the United States and the United Kingdom and the related established professional guilds—ACA, NBCC, CACREP, and BACP—to steer the developing profession.

As of June 2012, there is now one strong national Swiss Association for Counselling (SGfB) covering regional and linguistic interests (*Sprachreregionen*). This association is committed to the development and quality assurance of psychosocial counseling in the country. With the valida-
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The legitimacy of the federal examination, counseling may be fully legitimized as a separate profession within mental health lines of work. If local counselors continue to develop the profession at home and maintain best practices adopted from counseling professionals around the world, they will be equipped to support individuals and groups undergoing life, developmental, and/or spatial transitions in Switzerland.

References


