

Student Theoretical Beliefs at the Beginning and End of a Counseling Theories Course

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The purpose of this study was to explore the theoretical beliefs endorsed by school and mental health counseling students (n = 17) enrolled in an introductory counseling theories course. Using Q methodology, the investigators identified students' shared beliefs about human nature, change, and counseling upon entering the course (Time Point I) and at completion (Time Point II), as well as shifts in endorsement between these two time points. The findings reveal three themes for Time Point I and five themes for Time Point II, indicating that shared beliefs among counseling students evolve over time with increased classroom exposure. The authors discuss these distinct themes and relevant implications for counselor educators.

Keywords: theoretical orientation, counselling students, counselor education

Theoretical orientations provide counselors with a framework to conceptualize clients and guide clinical decisions in goal making, intervention choices, and evaluation of treatment outcomes (Gehart, 2013; Halbur & Halbur, 2015; Poznanski & McLennan, 2003). The general structure of theory contains corresponding assumptions about human nature, problems or dysfunction, change, and the process of counseling (Corey, 2013). Counselors often choose a counseling orientation that reflects their own personal values and perspectives (Poznanski & McLennan, 2003). Scholars in counselor education have recommended that counselors-in-training become aware of their worldviews and beliefs in order to find a goodness of fit between their personal philosophies and counseling theory (Auger, 2004; Carlson & Erikson, 1999; Guiffrida, 2005; Halbur &

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Halbur, 2015). However, within counselor education, the process of theory selection is still not fully understood, and the worldviews that master's level counselor trainees hold at the beginning and end of their counseling theory course is unknown. This study sought to understand the shared theoretical perspectives of counseling students at the beginning and end of their required counseling theory course. The trajectory of students' assumptions about human nature, counseling, and change by the end of the course were of particular interest.

Theoretical Endorsements Among Counseling Students

There is limited research of U.S. counselor education programs regarding the theoretical orientations of master's level students. Most of the empirical research regarding the specific theories endorsed by students has focused on psychologists-in-training (Boswell, Castonguay, & Pincus, 2009) or counseling trainees in international undergraduate counseling programs (Demir & Gazioglu, 2012; Sumari, Mohamad, & Ping, 2009). Nevertheless, information gleaned from research can inform the current study by shedding light on theoretical assumptions of novice mental health practitioners.

Two studies that specifically addressed the theoretical orientation of counseling students found that participants most frequently endorsed eclectic or integrated theory. In a study of U.S. psychologists-in-training, Boswell and colleagues (2009) found that the majority of students held assumptions that supported eclectic and integrated orientations of counseling and psychotherapy, followed by the most common single theories of psychodynamics and humanism. Demir and Gazioglu (2012) also found that the majority of their Turkish counseling student participants preferred eclectic and integrative orientations, with cognitive and humanistic approaches next.

Two other studies of student theoretical orientations had mixed results, of which neither identified eclecticism or integration as the preferred orientation. In a study of Malaysian counseling students, Sumari and colleagues (2009) found that students aligned themselves with directive theories (e.g., reality therapy, rational emotive behavior therapy [REBT], gestalt, cognitive behavioral theory [CBT]) at a higher rate than nondirective theories (e.g., psychodynamic, Adlerian, person-centered, humanistic). Freeman, Hayes, Kuch, and Taub (2007) also studied theory choice of counseling students but with participants enrolled in U.S. counselor education programs. The authors classified preferred theoretical orientations as either affective or behavioral and cognitive theories. Results indicated that, in general, students identified more with affective theories (e.g., person-centered, existential, gestalt) and less with cognitive theories (e.g., REBT, cognitive, psychodynamic, Adlerian). The most represented theories chosen by student participants, in order, were humanistic, cognitive behavioral, reality, psychodynamic, and system orientations.

The research completed on student theoretical orientations reveals some comparison to theory choice among mental health professionals. Students have supported eclectic and integrated theoretical orientations (Boswell et al., 2009; Demir & Gazioglu, 2012), directive and action based theories (Sumari et al., 2009) and affective theories

(Freeman et al., 2007). Similarly, studies have revealed that experienced counselors and psychologists have moved toward an eclectic and integrative theoretical approach when working with clients (Norcross, Hedges, & Castle, 2002; Norcross, Karpiak, & Santoro, 2005). Cognitive theories are also highly endorsed by psychologists (Norcross et al., 2005). Other research on mental health professionals gives directive and action-based theories (e.g., cognitive, behavioral, solution-focused) a slight edge when compared to insight-oriented (e.g., humanistic, psychodynamic, experiential) (Powell & Newgent, 2011).

Although there are some links between the above student and mental health professional theory choices, clear comparisons are difficult to make. The manner in which students and professionals identify theory has not been established. Each of the studies has categorized theoretical organization in different ways. Studies have listed theories individually (Boswell et al., 2007; Norcross et al., 2002, 2005) while others have categorized groups of theories such as directive and nondirective (Sumari et al., 2009), insight-oriented and action-based (Powell & Newgent, 2011), or behavioral/ cognitive and affective (Freeman et al., 2007). In some cases, particular theories have been grouped in opposing categories. For example, psychodynamic theory has been listed with affective theories in an insight-oriented category (Powell & Newgent, 2011) and listed with thought-based theories in a behavioral and cognitive category (Freeman et al., 2007). The research on theory endorsement has presented data in terms of specific theoretical orientations, whether listed separate or categorizes based on theory commonalities (e.g., affective, cognitive). To date, there is a dearth of research on theoretical beliefs that are not associated with specific theories but rather worldview perspectives. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to empirically examine changes in counseling students' perspectives about theory through their personal philosophies of human nature, change, and counseling while completing a required introductory counseling theories course.

Factors Related to Theory Endorsement

Research on theory selection has supported the important role of the counselor's unique personal qualities (Poznanski & McLennan, 2003). Among experienced clinicians, there is evidence to suggest that counselors choose the theory that best reflects their personal philosophies, beliefs, values (Bitar, Bean, & Bermudez, 2007; Fear & Woolfe, 1999; Norcross & Prochaska, 1983; Vasco & Dryden, 1994; Worthington & Dillon, 2003); psychological types (Varlami & Bayne, 2007); as well as their cognitive and emotional styles (Barrio Minton & Myers, 2008; Powell & Newgent, 2011). Taken together, this research suggests that theory selection is not based on one variable; rather, it is a complex process that entails multiple elements.

Research on theory endorsement of students is more scarce and inconclusive than investigations with advanced clinicians. When considering students' theoretical choices, some studies have matched personality traits (Boswell et al., 2009; Erickson, 1993; McBride & Martin, 1988) and thinking styles (Demir & Gazioglu, 2012). Others have

found no relationship between theory choice and personality type (Freeman et al., 2007; Sumari et al., 2009). Scholars have speculated that this absence of relationship is due to students' lack of education and experience when compared to more seasoned practitioners (Freeman et al., 2007; Sumari et al., 2009).

Education, supervision, and clinical experience have also been cited as additional factors that aid in exploring and identifying preferred theoretical orientations (Murdock, Banta, Stromseth, Viene, & Brown, 1998; Norcross & Prochaska, 1983; Pozanski & McLennan, 2003; Vasco & Dryden, 1994). As such, class assignments, readings, and discussion, as well as experiences with professors, supervisors, and other students are an additional influence in the adoption of theories. Bubenzer, West, Cox and McGlothlin (2012, p. 170) likened the learning experience in a classroom to a "pilgrimage of knowledge," in which teachers facilitate activities and engage students in a communal exploration of ideas where notions are continually evolving. The authors' emphasis on promoting a sense of community in classroom and supervision experiences, where ideas are exchanged and transparently explored, suggests that continued education and exposure to new ideas through others can help shape conceptions about theories. Shulman (1999) commented that to learn, students first must examine and verbalize what they already know, but then their ideas are shifted and expounded with new incoming information and discussion. These aspects of the educational experience indicate that students are continually evolving with incoming information.

According to Stoltenberg, McNeil, and Delworth's (1998) integrated developmental model (IDM) of supervision, counselors progress through four developmental stages. The first stage (Level One) is typically reflective of students who are just starting beginning to practice in the counseling field. These neophyte counselors will often choose the theory that their role-model uses; in many cases, one that is easily understood or a complex theory that has been simplified. With particular relevance for the present study, Stoltenberg and his colleagues (1998) also noted that Level One counselors may choose a theory that most closely aligns with their own theory of behavior. Fitzpatrick, Kovalak, and Weaver (2010) studied the process counseling students experience when developing a theory of practice. They noted that curriculum, particularly reading, and interacting with teachers, peers, and supervisors were also influential in the process of choosing theoretical orientations. It is these early developmental steps into theoretical orientation that were examined in this study.

The Current Study

The purpose of the present study was to learn more about counseling students' perspectives about theory through their personal philosophies of human nature, change, and counseling at the beginning and end of a 16-week introductory counseling theories course. Three questions guided this research: (a) What shared perspectives do counseling students have about human nature, change, and counseling at the start of an introductory counseling theories course? (b) What shared perspectives do counseling students have about human nature, change, and counseling at the end of an introductory

counseling theories course? and (c) How do groups of perspectives change from Time Point I to Time Point II?

Method

The present study used Q methodology to examine the theoretical development of master's-level school and mental health counseling students over the course of a semester. Q methodology allowed for an examination of the unique and universal perspectives through a process of qualitative and quantitative data analysis (Shinebourne & Adams, 2007). Q methodology was selected because it allowed for the consideration of theoretical concepts in relationship to one another, expression of individual perceptions through the sort and the post-sort responses, and computation of the statistical relationships between perceptions (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

Participants (P-set)

The P-set was comprised of school and mental health counseling students from two sections of a counseling theories course. Only those respondents who completed both time-points were included in the final analysis. The first section ($n = 11$) was at a mid-sized institution in the mid-west and the second section ($n = 6$) was at a mid-sized institution in the northeastern United States. Although 17 participants is a small sample for traditional quantitative methods, it is not uncommon for Q studies to examine a smaller number of participants more intensively (Brown, 1980). As such, the 17 participants in the present study were within the methodological parameters.

The participants had a mean age of 26.7 years ($SD = 4.4$) and were either in their first ($n = 16$) or second ($n = 1$) semester of graduate school. The majority of participants were in enrolled in mental health counseling ($n = 15$), one in college counseling, and one in school counseling. They self-identified their sex and race, identifying as female ($n = 14$) or male ($n = 3$) and as Caucasian ($n = 15$), African American ($n = 1$), or European ($n = 1$). Potential extraneous variables were assessed to see if they might influence how participants loaded on the factors. These variables included religious affiliation, exposure to theory prior to class, and previous clinical experience. Participants identified as Catholic ($n = 4$), Christian ($n = 2$), Roman Catholic ($n = 2$), Agnostic ($n = 1$), Atheist ($n = 1$), Baptist ($n = 1$), Methodist ($n = 1$), Spiritual ($n = 1$), and Wiccan ($n = 1$). Less than half of them ($n = 8$) read theory texts prior to starting the class, and five students had some clinical experience.

Instrumentation (Q Sample)

In Q methodology, the Q sample is typically constructed anew for each study in order to reflect the discourse occurring around a particular topic (Brown, 1993). The discourse is the discourse about a particular topic, or in the present example, the types of theories that students are being exposed to in a counseling theories course. In the

present study, the sample was structured on the theories covered in Corey's (2013) textbook, *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy*. Both classes used this text and the researchers conceptualized it as a shared structure for the theory-focused discourse.

The sample entailed pulling statements that reflected concepts from the 12 theories covered: (a) psychoanalytic; (b) Adlerian; (c) existential; (d) person-centered; (e) gestalt; (f) behaviorism; (g) cognitive; (h) reality; (i) feminism; (j) family; (k) narrative; and (l) solution-focused. The latter two theories were combined in Corey's text, but are distinct theories and were sampled as such. There were three replications for each theory, which resulted in a total of 36 statements in the Q sample (i.e., 12 theories x 3 replications = 36 statements).

The researchers constructed these statements to reflect three integral aspects of each particular theory. The researchers avoided jargon when constructing the statements so as to maximize the respondents' ability to utilize the concepts expressed. A fellow counselor educator vetted and confirmed the theoretical distinctness of each statement. See Table 1 for a list of the 36 statements that comprised the Q sample. These statements were transferred onto cards, which were used in the sorting process delineated below.

Procedure

The instructors of two counseling theories courses were contacted about potential participation in the study and both agreed. One instructor was a researcher on the present study (second author) and the other was an adjunct faculty member in the second program. Researchers entered the classroom on the first day of the theories course, described the study, and solicited students' voluntary participation. During the recruitment of students from the second author's courses, the researcher left the room during the solicitation process as to not influence student involvement and to allow student participation to remain anonymous.

The first time-point took place on the first class meeting and entailed students being provided with a demographic sheet, instructions for sorting, the Q sort cards, and a post-sort response sheets. The participants sorted the statements in Likert-type fashion from 4 (*most like my view of counseling*) to -4 (*most unlike my view of counseling*) on a semi-normal distribution. The Q sort technique required respondents to examine each theoretical statement in relationship to all the other statements (Watts & Stenner, 2012). This is in contrast to a quantitative approach wherein a respondent might rate one statement in isolation on a Likert scale (e.g., "how much do you agree with this statement?"), which may result in all statements being valued equally. The Q approach to data collection forces respondents to express a preference of one statement over another, thereby depicting unique and distinguishable perceptions (Brown, 1993). Once the sort was completed, the students were asked to record their sorts on the grid and provide written post-sort responses. The questions requested four pieces of information: (a) a description of how the statements are most like their views; (b) a description of how the statements are most unlike their views; (c) additional statements

that assisted in defining their views; and (d) any other thoughts or ideas about the sort. The second time-point involved the same materials and sorting conditions, but without the demographic forms.

Q Analysis

The Q analysis was completed using PQMethod 2.32 (Schmolck & Atkinson, 2012). The Q sort grids were entered into PQMethod and subjected to a by-person correlation, principle components analysis, and varimax rotation. This analysis results in grouping similar sorts into factors, which are presented as shared perceptions (Brown, 1993). The ability to examine the statistical relationship between subjectivities is a unique aspect of Q analysis that made it well suited to the present study.

Two separate analyses were conducted for each time point in order to establish the orientations present at the beginning of class and then again at the end of class. After the by-person correlations were conducted, the principle components analysis was examined for factors with eigenvalues of 1.00 or greater. This is a common starting point for factor extraction in varimax rotation, but does not ensure that the solution will be the best fit for the data (McKeown & Thomas, 1988; Watts & Stenner, 2005).

The first time point analysis resulted in five factors with eigenvalues of 1.00 or greater. These were extracted for rotation, but the between factor correlations were high for three of the factors. Such high correlations reflect a similar underlying factor; as such a solution of three factors was attempted. This approach resulted in lower between-factor correlations, thereby depicting three largely distinct factors.

The second time point analysis yielded five factors with eigenvalues of 1.00 or greater, which were extracted for rotation. The five-factor solution resulted in low-between factor correlations, thereby suggesting a tenable statistical solution. While both the first and second time point solutions had primarily low between-factor correlations, they also contained at most one correlation of 0.3. This is considered a mild between-factor correlation and should be considered with the awareness that the two factors may reflect similar concepts (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

Results

The interpretation process typically begins with an examination of the factor arrays for each factor. This is followed by an exploration of the consensus and distinguishing statements, which delineate the statistically similar and different statements between sorts. Finally, researchers turned their attention to the post-sort responses to give more depth to the statistical output. The latter is additional qualitative information that informs the interpretation of the perceptions that emerged statistically (Brown, 1993). Factor interpretation was done by using each of these elements along with the extraneous demographic variables (i.e., religion, previous experience with theory, and previous clinical experience) to explore if factors were connected to these attributes. Each time-point is delineated below, with each factor being given a descriptive title and a brief

explanation. The resultant factor arrays, which depict the ranking of the statements for the different factors, are located in Table 1.

Time Point I

Three factors emerged from the initial data collection period: *Getting By With Help From Our Friends*, *Personal Pep Talk*, and *Tangible Problem Solver*. The sorts were completed on the first class meeting. In acknowledgment of demographic findings that students had a range of minimal to no experience with counseling theories, the researchers made attempts to interpret their responses outside the constructs of theory. A summary of each factor is provided below.

Factor 1: *Getting by with help from our friends.* Students who shared this perception endorsed the belief that social and environmental factors importantly influence people's lives. This factor reflected participants' beliefs that people around an individual provide acceptance and give meaning to problematic experiences. Highly ranked statements included "Humans are shaped by their environment" and "Humans learn how to act from watching others." Furthermore, they viewed individuals as being less able to solve problems on their own. This was reflected in the negatively ranked distinguishing statement, "Humans have the innate ability to overcome problems." Instead, individuals need others around them to provide encouragement and assistance to find ways of coping through problems.

Factor 2: *Personal pep talk.* Students who shared this perception endorsed that individuals can rely on themselves to find strength, and negated biological or relational influences. Statements that were ranked higher in importance reflected individual needs such as "Humans need to be empowered to live full lives," "Humans need to feel like they are worthwhile," "Humans have freedom to choose," and "Humans need to accept themselves." Based on the short answer responses, the interpretation of highly ranked statements was affirming, empowering, and encouraging of trust in one's self.

Problems were not considered important as reflected in a high ranking of "Humans are not defined by their problems" and a moderately low ranking of "Humans need to solve problems." Students perceived that although problems exist, humans could seek empowerment and acceptance of themselves through difficult experiences. Additionally, while respondents identified that humans "need to be socially connected" as moderately important, they ranked environmental and social influences as less important. Lower ranked statements included "Humans behave in a direct response to their family" and "Humans can change under controlled environments." The lower ranked statements indicate that although being connected to others is important, others do not make (or change) who a person is. Overall, this factor highlighted individualism and a need to accept one's self at any given time.

TABLE 1
Factor Arrays for Time Points I & II

Statement	Time Point I			Time Point II				
	IA	IB	IC	IIA	IIB	IIC	IID	IIE
1. Humans learn how to act from watching others.	4	1	4	2	3	1	1	0
2. Humans have defense mechanisms to cop.	0	1	3	0	0	3	0	3
3. Hmans are not defined by their problems.	1	2	-1	4	0	0	-1	0
4. Humans have a need to be socially connected with others.	1	3	2	1	1	-2	3	4
5. Humans experience times when their problem does not exist.	-3	0	-2	-1	-4	-2	-1	-2
6. Humans naturally strive for success in order to overcome feelings of inferiority.	-3	1	0	-2	-1	0	-1	-1
7. Humans need to identify and change unhelpful thoughts.	2	2	-1	0	4	2	1	1
8. Humans need to feel like they are worthwhile.	2	3	2	3	0	0	3	1
9. Humans behave in a direct response to their family members'.	-1	-3	1	-4	0	-1	-2	-1
10. Humans need to take responsibility.	1	1	1	3	1	-1	4	-1
11. Humans are shaped by their environment.	4	0	4	4	2	0	-1	1
12. Humans are pulled to find meaning in their lives.	3	0	0	3	-3	0	3	-1
13. Humans are more than just a combination of perceptions.	1	3	-3	1	1	-1	0	2
14. Humans control their emotions by controlling their thoughts.	-1	0	-1	1	3	-2	-3	-1
15. Humans have ideas about who they are based on the stories others tell about them.	-1	-2	0	-2	-1	-4	-2	1
16. Humans work to meet basic needs.	-1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
17. Humans need to solve problems.	-2	-1	0	-2	1	1	2	-4
18. Humans need to change what they are doing if it is not meeting their needs.	0	2	0	1	4	3	0	0
19. Humans are driven by instincts.	0	-3	0	-1	-3	3	-4	-2
20. Humans have freedom to choose.	0	4	1	0	0	2	2	-2
21. Humans create their lives through the stories they tell about themselves.	-3	0	2	-4	2	-1	-1	3
22. Human problems are the result of illogical thoughts.	2	-4	-4	-3	1	-4	1	0
23. Humans naturally move towards positive ways of being.	-2	-2	-2	0	-4	-3	4	-3
24. Humans have issues from the past that interfere with their future.	0	0	3	2	2	4	0	0
25. Humans have strengths that need to be allowed to develop.	3	0	1	2	-2	2	1	3
26. Humans need to overcome their societal enforced oppression.	0	-1	-4	0	-2	-3	0	-1
27. Humans need to be empowered to live full lives.	1	4	-3	1	-2	0	2	-1
28. Humans have the innate ability to overcome problems.	-4	-2	3	-3	-2	4	0	-3
29. Humans must feel like they are	0	-1	-1	0	-1	-2	2	2

contributing to society in a meaningful way.									
30. Humans find their own unique solutions to problems.	-2	0	0	-1	0	0	1	4	
31. Humans can change under controlled conditions.	0	-4	-2	-1	2	-2	3	-3	
32. Humans need to become conscious of their subconscious.	-4	-1	-3	-2	-1	1	-4	-4	
33. Humans typically live on the surface of their awareness.	-1	-3	-1	-1	-1	1	-2	-2	
34. Humans are best understood in the context of their entire family.	-2	-1	-2	-3	-3	-3	-2	2	
35. Humans can inherit the problems of their family.	2	-2	1	0	0	1	-3	1	
36. Humans need to accept themselves.	3	2	2	2	3	1	-1	2	

Factor 3: Tangible problem-solver. Students with this perception shared a preference for the concreteness of the environment, of observation, and of connection with others. Highly ranked statements included “Humans learn how to act from watching others” and “Humans are shaped by their environment.” This concreteness extended to the conceptualization of problems, which were viewed as being ever present in people’s lives. The short answer responses revealed that participants with this perspective believed that humans are situated in the tangible nature of their problems and develop ways of dealing with those problems.

Distinguishing statements reflected an emphasis on the presence of problems and the individual’s ability to overcome them. These included “Humans have issues from the past that interfere with their future,” “Humans have defense mechanisms to cope,” and “Humans have the innate ability to overcome problems.” This perception reflected the idea that abstract work on the subconscious was running counter to the nature of problems. One respondent indicated “the subconscious should stay that way.” Thereby, reinforcing the interpretation that problems are tangible and require definite solutions.

Time Point II

The following five factors emerged during Time-Point II: *Strong Amidst the Environment, Rethink and Redo to Meet Challenges, Internal Challenges, Inherently Positive and Meaning-Making, and Developing Solutions.* These sorts were completed at the end of the 15-week course on Counseling Theories, in which 12 theories were studied (extra weeks were for ethics, multiculturalism, and exams). Because all respondents had been educated in counseling theories, the researchers conceptualized the perceptions as being informed by theory. Therefore, there are allusions to particular theoretical orientations, whereas none were used in time-point I. A summary of each factor is provided below.

Factor 1: Strong amidst the environment. Students with this perception viewed problems as being located in the environment. Humans can be shaped, but are not defined, by these problems. Positively ranked statements included “Humans are shaped by their environment” and “Humans are not defined by their problems.” The problems

that people experience are “real” and located in the environment, as noted in the negatively ranked “Humans create their lives through the stories they tell about themselves” and “Human problems are the result of illogical thoughts.” This perception reflected an emphasis on autonomy and strength, requiring that people take responsibility for their own part of the difficulties in their lives. However, humans should not allow these external problems to influence them. They need to stay centered in what is meaningful and take responsibility for knowing and accepting who they are. This was reflected in positively ranked statements like “Humans need to take responsibility,” “Humans are pulled to find meaning in their lives,” and “Humans need to accept themselves.” To that end, humans choose to move towards positive ways of being.

Factor 2: Rethink and redo to meet challenges. Students with this perception emphasized thoughts and behaviors as the key to creating change. Highly ranked statements were “Humans need to identify and change unhelpful thoughts” and “Humans need to change what they are doing if it is not meeting their needs.” This viewpoint indicated that solutions to problems are within people’s grasp, as in “Humans control their emotions by controlling their thoughts.” People were viewed as malleable to meet the needs of a problem, largely being responsive to the challenges present in the environment. Furthermore, the environment was a source of knowledge in creating change, as it gave people models to learn and grow from. The statement “Humans are shaped by their environment” was highly ranked and contextualized amongst other cognitive and behavioral concepts, suggesting an emerging cognitive behavioral therapy orientation.

Factor 3: Internal challenges. Humans often experience deeply seeded problems, which are largely internally derived. Some highly ranked statements were “Humans have issues from the past that interfere with their future” and “Humans are driven by instincts.” When people encounter problems they have the ability to change what they are doing to overcome and develop ways of dealing with difficulties. Supportive statements included “Humans have the innate ability to overcome problems,” “Humans need to change what they are doing if it is not meeting their needs,” and “Humans have defense mechanisms to cope.” This perception reflected an emerging analytic thinker, noted by the highly ranked “instincts” and “defense mechanisms.” Further supported by the statements “Humans need to become conscious of their subconscious” and “Humans typically live on the surface of their awareness,” which were ranked higher than other factors in Time Point II.

Factor 4: Inherently positive and meaning-making. Students with this perspective viewed humans as being inherently positive. Participants noted in the short answer responses that people work towards meaning in their lives, which requires them to take responsibility. Highly ranked statements included “Humans naturally move towards positive ways of being,” “Humans need to take responsibility,” and “Humans are pulled to find meaning in their lives.” The first statement was ranked significantly higher than

other perspectives, which suggested that it uniquely defined this viewpoint. These rankings, along with post-sort responses, are suggestive of an emerging existential-humanist perspective. This was supported by the view that connection with individuals and society were of great importance. The beliefs that “Humans have a need to be socially connected with others” and “Humans must feel like they are contributing to society in a meaningful way” were both highly valued. These positive ways of being were fostered or facilitated by feelings of worth and empowerment, which emerge through social connection or engagement.

Factor 5: Developing solutions. Short answer responses in this group reflected that humans find solutions to their problems through connections with others. Highly ranked statements included “Humans find their own unique solutions to problems” and “Humans have a need to be socially connected with others.” Participants indicated that problems are always present in people’s lives but can be resolved. This perception had a uniquely low ranking of the statement “Humans need to solve problems.” This suggested that not all problems required a solution, indicating some problems may be remediated by strengths that people develop. People use language to ascribe meaning for them and find those unique ways to solve problems. Solutions do not just appear, rather, people need to foster strengths to find them.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to examine counseling students’ shared perspectives of human nature, change, and counseling at the beginning and end of a 16 week introductory counseling theories course. Shifts in endorsement between these two time points were also of interest. At the beginning of the counseling theory course students held one of three main perspectives: (a) *Getting By With Help From Our Friends*, in which social connectedness was highlighted as important; (b) *Personal Pep Talk*, in which individual abilities to overcome problems was stressed; and (c) *Tangible Problem Solver*, in which concrete solutions to problems and personal responsibility was emphasized.

To date, research on student theoretical perspectives have been completed after participants have had more exposure with counseling theories (e.g., Boswell et al., 2009; Demir & Gazioglu, 2012; Freeman et al., 2007; Sumari et al., 2009). As such, the findings of Time Point I in this study are a first of its kind in counselor education. The perspectives are a reflection of what incoming students believe about human nature, change, and counseling before having formal education in a master’s level counseling theory course. Although these perspectives are not named for specific theories, the sorted statements and resulting descriptions of each show similar ideas to those of established counseling theories.

Results indicated that two perspectives coming into the theories course, *Getting By With Help From Our Friends* and *Personal Pep Talk*, stressed themes similar to humanism such as environment, relationships, propensity toward growth and self-actualization, as well as existential themes of responsibility and meaning making (Corey, 2013; Gehart,

2013). These findings are similar to other studies that indicated humanistic orientations were endorsed by students (Boswell et al., 2009; Demir & Gazioglu, 2012; Freeman et al., 2007). The third perspective, *Tangible Problem Solver*, emphasized that concrete solutions that can be systematically followed to solve problems. Learning from others and using models found within people's environments was also highlighted in this perspective. Although not directly stated, these ideas echo directive and action-oriented theories that are cognitive and behavioral. In the past, students readily endorsed directive theories (Sumari et al., 2009). Specifically, cognitive behavioral orientations were rated high among counselor education students (Freeman et al., 2007).

The data from Time Point II indicated that students created additional broader ideas related to assumptions about human nature, change, and counseling by the end of the theories course. The five new perspectives created by the end of the class were distinct perspectives from the first three. Although some perspectives in Time Point I and II shared high or low ranked statements they still had distinguishing characteristics that made them different. For example, the perspectives *Getting by With Help From Our Friends* from Time Point I and *Strong Amidst the Environment* from Time Point II both ranked the environment as a strong influence for the creation of problems. They differed, though, in their focus on needing others to solve issues and the requisite of ascribing personal meaning and responsibility to problems.

The five new perspectives at the end of the course could more be grounded within specific theoretical orientations. The sorted statements more clearly grouped to reflect established theories of CBT, psychodynamic, humanistic, and strength-based solution focused counseling. These shared perspectives that emerged at Time Point II could more clearly be compared with students in other studies. Particularly, comparisons could be made in the assumptions aligned with CBT, psychodynamic, and humanistic theories (Boswell et al., 2009; Demir & Gazioglu, 2012; Freeman et al., 2007; Sumari et al., 2009). Increased exposure and understanding of the theories by the end of the course could be a reason that the perspectives were more solidified and more reflective of established counseling theories. Freeman and colleagues' (2007) speculated that increased exposure to theory and participation in classroom activities (e.g., assignments, reading) could help students form more solid assumptions and theory identification. Fitzpatrick et al. (2010) also noted that students connect with theories through reading, curriculum, and interactions with teachers and peers. With more knowledge of different theories by the end of the course, participants' may have been able to categorize and communicate their assumptions by theory when completing the research concourse.

Notably, although new perspectives were created, participants did not group together as the course continued and as the ideas evolved. For example, participants who began the class in the *Personal Pep Talk* perspective did not move together to a new data group. Instead, participants individually dispersed to create the five different perspectives identified at Time Point II. The evidence that new perspectives were made at the end of the course and the fact that participants did not group together between time points suggests that students pre-existing ideas evolved and changed throughout the course. As a result there is evidence that more perspectives were created and viewpoints

became more developed. Furthermore, the perspectives did not align with any of the extraneous demographic variables at either time point. This suggests that students' viewpoints were not defined solely by religion, previous exposure to theory, or clinical experience.

As the end of the counseling theories course created five new perspectives, the finding may support the notion that communal experience of a shared course can expand possibilities and generate new avenues for thinking and knowledge (Bubbenzer et al., 2012). Hansen (2010) emphasized that counseling professional identity, through theoretical orientation, is continually being re-created through experiences and dialogue. Similarly, as indicated in the results of this study, students' incoming ideas may inherently be altered over the semester by virtue of being exposed to new ideas, lectures, conversations, readings, and assignments. Perhaps, pre-espoused theoretical beliefs are non-existent outside of the temporal state of which they were surveyed (Gergen, 1991, 2009). Therefore, students' viewpoints on theory may always be evolving in some way or another. This idea is in opposition to staying with one set of beliefs and integrating them with established theory as suggested in counselor education literature (Carlson & Erickson, 1999; Guiffrida, 2005; Spruill & Benshoff, 2000). Alternatively, as the results of this study indicated that pre-espoused ideas are expanded over the course of the semester, a model in which counselor educators facilitate students' flexibility of thought can be beneficial.

Implications for Counselor Educators

Although restraint should be used when considering the generalizability of this research, results do offer some implications for counselor educators. Authors have suggested counselor educators nurture students in finding their theories based on their beliefs and about human nature and counseling and natural abilities (Guiffrida, 2005; Halbur & Halbur, 2015). Although clinicians will typically find a theoretical orientation that suits their personal philosophies and values (Bitar et al., 2007; Fear & Woolfe, 1999; Norcross & Prochaska, 1983; Stoltenberg et al., 1998; Vasco & Dryden, 1994; Worthington & Dillon, 2003) and attributes (Barrio Minton & Myers, 2008; Powell & Newgent, 2011; Varlami & Bayne, 2007), for students this alignment is inconclusive (Freeman et al., 2007). In this study five new theoretical perspectives were created at the end of the course, indicating that students' perceptions of human nature, change, and counseling evolve. This change in assumptions could result from having more experience with theory. This is supported elsewhere in literature that cites classroom experiences (e.g., reading, discussion) will influence theory development (Fitzpatrick et al., 2010).

Being aware that students' incoming ideas about human nature, change, and counseling will progress over the course of the semester is critical for counselor educators. In the beginning stages of an introductory counseling theories course, it might be less advantageous to help student identify their beliefs in an effort to match them to theoretical orientation. Aligning with a theory that is more familiar and natural is easier than trying to understand something more complex or new. As such, beginning

counseling students, typically classified as Level One of the IDM, are more likely to endorse theories related to their own behaviors and ideas (Stoltenberg et al., 1998). However, during training in an introductory to counseling theories course students will likely integrate new information with what they already know to form new opinions (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1992). These new perspectives gained from their interactive work with material and classmates will guide students in their theory selection (Fitzpatrick et al., 2010).

Instead, of encouraging students to align themselves with theory during the beginning stages of their education, counselor educators can instill an exploratory climate in the introductory theories course. While being exposed to multiple theories, students can be reflective of how all of the theories may be impacting them. Activities, readings, and discussions can encourage students to challenge their assumptions and acknowledge the possibility that perspectives may change and evolve. Rather than asking students to choose a theory to endorse within the semester, it could be helpful for them to remain open to the influence the theories may have on them and their values and beliefs about human nature, change, and counseling.

Limitations and Future Research

This research study was not without limitations. If these confines are addressed in future investigations, additional information can be added to the discussion of theory acquisition for counseling students. First, post-sort surveys at the second time point were not obtained for one of the participating classes. Having supporting qualitative research for the second time point of the class would have yielded richer data and is something that could be added to future investigations. Additionally, although this research indicated that students' preexisting ideas about counseling theory evolve over time, it did not study the specific factors that might lead to the change in perspectives. Although the research was able to establish that the viewpoints were not solely defined by religion, previous exposure to theory, or clinical experience, it is not able to identify the specific variables that did shape this development. Future research can examine the process of the change in ideas and the elements of a learning environment that are influential. Finally, this research did not consider teaching methods in the theory class or seek methods of measuring or observing teaching styles. Future investigations can examine the pedagogical practices of counselor educators for teaching theory.

Conclusion

This study sought to determine counseling students' pre-espoused theoretical perspectives of human nature, change, and counseling before and after completing a counseling theories course. Students began the counseling theories course in one of three shared perspectives; however, ended the course with five different common viewpoints. Findings suggested that exposure to theories and time throughout the course can influence beliefs and therefore change pre-existing notions. Implications of this study

are centered on encouraging students to maintain open pathways to various theories and embracing the notion of change and growth of theoretical assumptions. Being aware that students enter classes with perspectives that are likely to evolve over the course of the semester is critical for counselor educators. This change in student ideas can remind instructors to instill an exploratory environment in the theories course rather than helping students align with a theory in the beginning of their counseling education.

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