

Self-Efficacy of Counselor Trainees in Pre-Practicum: A Phenomenological Study

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The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore pre-practicum counselor trainees' perceptions of self-efficacy related to beginning clinical work. Specifically, the researchers were interested in better understanding self-efficacy and competence related to core training areas, as well as experiences that help or hinder self-efficacy development. To explore these questions, the researchers conducted a focus group with six counseling graduate students. Using content analysis procedures, the following seven themes were identified: (a) Counselor Fears, (b) Coping, (c) Motivation, (d) Group Work, (e) Ethical Considerations, (f) Multicultural Considerations, and (g) Recommendations. Implications for counselor educators and supervisors are discussed.

Keywords: self-efficacy, counseling, competence, counselor trainees, counselors-in-training, program evaluation

Self-efficacy is defined as feelings or beliefs about one's ability to use an acquired skill (Tang et al., 2004). In the context of counseling, self-efficacy can be understood as one's beliefs of "capabilities to effectively counsel a client" (Larson et al., 1992, p. 120), and is seen as one of three reliable counselor characteristics that can be used in the training and selection of counselors (Beutler, Merchado, & Neufeldt, 1994). While research has been conducted on self-efficacy in counselor trainees (e.g., Larson & Daniels, 1998), little research has focused on counselor trainees' perceptions of self-

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efficacy prior to entering clinical work. Additionally, much of the prior work in this area has been quantitative in nature, thus calling for a need to qualitatively examine counselor trainees' lived experiences of their competence in counseling. To address this gap, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of pre-practicum counselor trainees.

Counselor Trainee Self-Efficacy

Scholars such as Larson and Daniels (1998) and McCarthy (2014) have proposed various ways to reduce counselor trainees' level of anxiety during their training experience in order to help them better perform in counseling sessions. They recommend that increasing counselor trainees' self-efficacy is one strategy that can help them manage anxiety experienced during their clinical training (e.g., practicum). This recommendation is supported by research (e.g., Bandura, 1956; Bowman & Roberts, 1979) that suggests that anxiety plays an important part in counselor trainees' performance and clinical judgment during counseling sessions. Relatedly, findings of these studies (Bandura, 1956; Bowman & Roberts, 1979) also suggest that counselors with higher levels of self-efficacy tend to experience more positive expectancies of themselves as well as lower anxiety.

Bandura's social cognitive theory (1995) posits that an individual's self-efficacy is developed from a number of factors, including experiences of mastery, social affirmation of mastery experiences, observation of other individuals' mastery experiences, and emotional arousal. In counseling, this may translate to counselors' experiences of mastery of counseling skills, modeling of counseling skills, and affective arousal (Larson & Daniels, 1998), all of which are practiced in counseling coursework prior to clinical experiences with real clients. Furthermore, according to Bandura (1977), an individual's expectations of self-efficacy is the most powerful predictor of behavior change because a person's self-efficacy determines his or her initial decision to take action or engage in a given behavior. Thus, pre-practicum counseling students' self-efficacy is an important variable to assess and foster, particularly prior to their experiences in clinical practice.

Tang et al. (2004) defined self-efficacy as feelings or beliefs about one's ability to use a skill that one has acquired. Through both foundational coursework and clinical experiences, counseling programs aim to increase students' self-efficacy (CACREP [the Council for Accreditation in Counseling and Related Educational Programs], 2016) by bridging the gap between coursework and clinical practice. Previous research (Kozina, Grabovari, De Stefano, & Drapeau, 2010) has emphasized clinical practice as the main growth area for self-efficacy and has minimized the importance of the development of pre-practicum self-efficacy. For instance, Tang and colleagues (2004) found that in CACREP-accredited counseling programs where coursework was associated with clinical endorsement, self-efficacy was higher. However, contrary to previous findings, Mullen, Uwamahoro, Blount, and Lambie (2015) found that, although counseling students' self-efficacy increased significantly as a result of an overall counseling program experience at a CACREP-accredited university, the majority of the students' self-efficacy

increased *prior* to clinical experience, and not as a *result* of clinical experience. They completed their longitudinal study by administering the Counselor Self-Efficacy Scale (Melchert, Hays, Wiljanen, & Kolocek, 1996) to the same group of students ($N = 179$) on three occasions (i.e., new-student orientation, practicum, and internship) over the course of three years (2008-2011).

Self-efficacy levels of pre-clinical counseling students may provide an important window into how effectively they will eventually work with clients. Drawing upon previous studies, McCarthy (2014) found that higher levels of self-efficacy decreased critical self-evaluation that negatively impacted counseling sessions. Further, findings from this study showed that students' ($N = 166$) self-efficacy regarding counseling microskills (e.g., confrontation), and self-efficacy for working with difficult client behaviors (e.g., crisis) were positively correlated with client outcomes. Based on previous findings, it is evident that self-efficacy is an important aspect of counselor trainees' professional development and a construct that requires further investigation.

Counselor Competency Areas and Evaluation

Little is known about how counselor trainees perceive their competence to work with clients prior to offering counseling services (Guyjet, Longwell-Grice, & Molina, 2009). Counselor trainees may have little influence regarding their own professional development and preparedness to work with clients, possibly inhibiting their self-efficacy in specific areas (Bandura, 1956, 1977; Bowman & Roberts, 1979; Kozina et al., 2010). To promote consistency across counseling programs, CACREP (2016) identifies eight competency areas of foundational knowledge for counselors, including: professional counseling orientation and ethical practice, social and cultural diversity, human growth and development, career development, counseling and helping relationships, group counseling and group work, assessment and testing, and research and program evaluation. Thus, CACREP-accredited counseling programs structure their coursework to target the aforementioned areas in an effort to prepare counselors to work with clients. Additionally, CACREP requires counselor education programs to adhere to gatekeeping policies through methods of evaluation (CACREP, 2016; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). Thus, counselor education programs are expected to routinely evaluate their curriculum to ensure that minimum training standards are met (CACREP, 2016; Herdlein, 2004).

However, one way in which many programs fall short is by failing to involve students in the evaluation process (Guyjet et al., 2009), potentially resulting in missed opportunities to evaluate students' experiences of growth and self-efficacy in the main counseling areas. Additionally, by not involving students in the evaluation process, programs may experience instances of failed gate-keeping (Homrich, DeLorenzi, Bloom, & Godbee, 2014) or gate slipping (Gaubatz & Vera, 2006), in which students who do not meet training qualifications proceed through the counseling program. Cannon and Cooper (2010) further emphasized the need for counselors and counselor educators to collaborate as CACREP standards evolve in order to best serve future

counselors and clients. Students who are directly engaged in the educational process of the eight CACREP content areas may be an underutilized resource in generating programmatic feedback to strengthen training programs. While course evaluations may provide some feedback regarding individual coursework, little is known regarding the overall picture and lived experiences of students' self-efficacy and their specific needs in counselor preparation programs. Consequently, programs may inadvertently focus on areas of growth that fail to match students' needs and that may not provide the most effective learning environment to increase self-efficacy and counselor competence.

The purpose of this study was to investigate pre-practicum counselor trainees' lived experiences of counselor self-efficacy and self-perceived competence. The research questions identified included (a) what are the lived experiences of pre-practicum counselor trainees regarding self-efficacy and competence of core counseling areas? and (b) what experiences do pre-practicum counselor trainees engage in during their counseling program that help or hinder self-efficacy development?

Method

In order to explore the lived experiences of counselor trainees regarding self-efficacy and competence in the main areas of counselor training, the researchers employed a phenomenological methodology (Moustakas, 1994). A goal of phenomenology is to understand the variations as well as the collective experience of a particular phenomenon among a group of persons and to ultimately identify the essence, or meaning, of their experience (Creswell, 2013, Hays & Wood, 2011). Thus, a qualitative focus group research method was selected for this study.

The Researchers

The researchers included two Caucasian women and one Caucasian man who were doctoral candidates in a CACREP-accredited counselor education program. They all have experience teaching and co-teaching master's level counseling courses (e.g., counseling techniques, group counseling, ethics, practicum) and supervising master's students both pre-practicum and during their clinical experiences. All researchers have earned their master's degrees in CACREP-accredited master's counseling programs in three geographically different areas in the United States. All researchers have previous experience completing coursework in and conducting qualitative research.

The researcher's experiences as instructors as well as their experiences as counselor trainees influenced their interest in the topic and may have influenced bias in the research. In order to promote objectivity and sensitivity to the issue at hand, the researchers used bracketing to show the reader how the researcher is connected to the topic and the data, so that readers can interpret the findings accordingly (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The researchers stated their positionality (i.e., assumptions, stance) about potential findings to account for potential biases. For example, the researchers anticipated that students' perceptions of their competency and readiness to work with

clients might heighten specific fears or worries. The researchers also anticipated that students would provide feedback regarding their program's strengths and weaknesses in terms of addressing their needs.

Sampling and Participants

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study, the researchers utilized a purposive convenience sampling method to ensure that they obtained counselor trainees from a master's counseling program in the Southeastern United States who had completed at least two semesters of coursework and had not yet begun their first practicum experience. Counselor trainees were recruited verbally in second year master's classes. Interested counselor trainees received informed consent including a discussion on confidentiality and its limits. Counselor trainees were reminded that participation was voluntary and that they would not be compensated for their time.

Six master's level counselor trainees (with an emphasis in mental health, school, and marriage, couples, and family counseling) in a CACREP-accredited counseling program participated in the study. All counselor trainees had participated in role plays in their courses, but had not yet experienced clinical work with clients prior to their participation in the study. Counselor trainees were in varying stages of their counseling program, with five counselor trainees being in their second semester (83.3%) and one counselor trainee (16.7%) in the fourth semester. The average age of counselor trainees was 25 years ($SD = 2.68$, range = 22-28). Four counselor trainees (66.7%) reported their gender as female and two counselor trainees (33.3%) reported their gender as male. Table 1 contains a summary of counselor trainees' other key demographic data as well their course progress.

TABLE 1

Focus Group Counselor Trainees' Demographic Characteristics

| Characteristic | <i>n</i> |
|---|----------|
| Ethnic background | |
| Asian | 2 |
| Caucasian | 1 |
| African American/African/Black | 1 |
| Hispanic/Latina/Latino | 1 |
| Indian | 1 |
| Semester in counselor preparation program | |
| Second semester | 5 |
| Fourth semester | 1 |

| | |
|--|---|
| Counseling courses taken or currently taking | |
| Introduction to counseling | 6 |
| Group counseling | 6 |
| Counseling theories | 6 |
| Ethics | 5 |
| Human development | 5 |
| Counseling techniques | 5 |
| Research | 4 |
| Mental health care system | 2 |
| Multicultural counseling | 2 |
| Diagnosis | 1 |
| Career counseling | 1 |
| Children and adolescents | 1 |
| Psychoeducational testing | 1 |

Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers conducted a focus group comprised of all six counselor trainees. The focus group lasted about 1.5 hours and took place in the program's Counseling and Research Center. All three researchers were present during the focus group. All three researchers participated in the focus group data collection process. All participants shared their experiences in the focus group. Sample questions included: (a) "Please tell us about your level of readiness as you think about working with real clients," and (b) "Please tell us how prepared you feel in terms of group work." Other questions included those surrounding ethical considerations, general work with clients, and multicultural considerations, targeting specific areas of the eight CACREP standards aforementioned. Prompts for questions included (a) "tell us more about that" and (b) "please provide a specific example."

The researchers used content analysis procedures (Stemler, 2001) to analyze the focus group transcript. Coding units were defined as each complete sentence within the transcript. One counselor trainee statement could thus be broken into several complete sentences and receive different codes for different parts of the statement. Each researcher reviewed the transcript and individually created a list of preliminary themes. Duplicated ideas were combined into a single idea. The lead author then combined all lists into a draft of the final master coding configuration, which was then finalized by the full research team. Finally, the researchers completed a practice test of the coding process, and made some additional revisions to the master coding scheme.

All three researchers coded all counselor trainee data independently in an Excel spreadsheet and assigned a code for each statement, based on the coding scheme. Once the transcript was coded by all three researchers, a final consensus code was then identified (i.e., the same code had been assigned by at least two researchers). A total of 174 statements were coded, and the calculated overall percentage agreement among the

three raters for the primary codes was 96.57%. The final coding scheme included seven categories: (a) Counselor Fears, (b) Coping, (c) Motivation, (d) Group Work, (e) Ethical Considerations, (f) Multicultural Considerations, and (g) Recommendations.

Establishing Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the validity of qualitative research (Moustakas, 1994). The researchers employed several methods to establish trustworthiness, including (a) bracketing their experiences and stating their assumptions; (b) keeping a detailed audit trail and research journal which contained reflections throughout the research process; (c) engaging in peer debriefing and consultations with other researchers with qualitative expertise; (d) individually completing horizontalization, which included reading and re-reading the transcript to identify themes that were then compared and consolidated; (e) completing a literature review after the data collection and analysis to avoid bias and influence; and (f) employing member checking to validate the data by the counselor trainees. Member checking included obtaining participant feedback on the identified main themes of the data, which was gained via individual face-to-face discussions with each participant after data analysis was completed. Trustworthiness may have been affected by the fact that dual relationships existed between the counselor trainee participants and the researchers, which may have inadvertently influenced counselor trainees' responses or data analysis procedures.

Findings

The researchers aimed to investigate the lived experiences of masters' level students' experiences of their self-efficacy and counseling competency prior to clinical work. The following seven themes related to students' lived experiences regarding self-efficacy and competence related to the CACREP core training areas were identified: (a) Counselor Fears, (b) Coping, (c) Motivation, (d) Group Work, (e) Ethical Considerations, (f) Multicultural Considerations, and (g) Recommendations.

Theme One: Counselor Fears

The theme of *Counselor Fears* related to fears associated with the anticipation of working with real clients. This category included aspects of feeling ill-prepared to work with different types of clients, self-focus, competence, client judgment, fear of lack of direction in a session, fear of lacking skill competence, fear of group counseling, and fear of not growing as a counselor.

Counselor trainees reported feeling ill-prepared to work with different types of clients. Specifically, counselor trainees discussed feelings of uncertainty regarding counseling clients who were "under-talkers," "over-talkers," or "resistant" in therapy. One counselor trainee noted, "A worry for me is potentially getting a client that doesn't speak [or is] just very direct." Furthermore, counselor trainees reported fears related to

feeling focused on themselves while working with clients, which was something they had experienced during class role plays. They described these experiences as fears of “being in one’s own head” and focusing on one’s own decision process, making it difficult to stay present with clients. Counselor trainees also discussed feeling consumed with “mental noise” and being overly focused on what skills to use and how to proceed accurately, rather than actively listening and empathizing with clients. One counselor trainee described, “My main thing with my fear is that I may be too focused on what techniques and what skills I’m going to use and not being with the client at that moment.” Another added, “Maybe having enough tools but just not knowing what to go with, like I don’t know what to use right now.” Counselor trainees also reported feeling intimidated by group counseling. They discussed fears of group counseling as it compared to individual therapy. Counselor trainees specifically feared the increased number of individuals in the room and feeling incompetent to work with them. One counselor trainee explained, “Oh I’m scared to lead groups, more than I am to have like one client.”

Further, counselor trainees reported fearing being judged by clients, especially judgment related to counselor trainees’ lack of counselor training and their young age. They also worried that clients might perceive them as incompetent and as possessing poor counseling skills. For example, one counselor trainee noted:

Though they know what they’re getting into when they sign the informed consent, you know they still might say to me or somebody else like, ‘oh, you’re just a master’s student you’re not a counselor yet—like do you even know what you’re talking about’ and just kind of that doubt.

Additionally, counselor trainees feared not having a clear direction in sessions with clients. Specifically, counselor trainees reflected on their fears of “getting stuck” in sessions with clients and not knowing which direction to take in sessions. One counselor trainee reflected:

Maybe I would feel I didn’t know enough, but you want to provide the best care for the people that you are going to see in practicum so you just feel like ‘I got stuck so let me go find someone to help me and help you.’

Another experience included counselor trainees’ fears of not growing as a result of the clients they worked with. For instance, they worried that while different types of clients would help them grow as counselors, the lack of variety of clients might stunt their growth. One counselor trainee noted, “[If] you’re not practicing the skills then you are not growing and developing as a counselor.”

Theme Two: Coping

As mentioned previously, students reported experiencing various levels of anxiety and fears that they felt impacted their feelings of competency negatively. However, they also mentioned various ways in which they coped with such experiences. The *Coping* category consisted of various experiences and strategies that addressed counseling students' abilities to cope with the stressors that impacted them, including both internal (e.g., self-acceptance) and external (e.g., peer relationships) coping strategies.

One counselor trainee reported that the utilization of coping strategies was a form of self-acceptance, saying that "you kind of accept the fears and failures and the things you know you're going to mess up." In reference to self-acceptance, one counselor trainee stated, "maybe that will help with things like mental noise;" which was a fear previously agreed upon by the counselor trainees. Establishing empowering program relationships were agreed upon as another coping strategy while in the midst of their master's counseling program. It was apparent that establishing such relationships with surrounding peers and doctoral students helped to ease program-related stress to some degree: "Having those relationships with peers and kind of the doc students. I think you learn and grow a lot from those relationships. You can process that experience with someone." Counselor trainees reported that peer relationships provided informal help and guidance, beyond supervision, to process clinical experiences in order to "learn and grow."

Theme Three: Motivation

The *Motivation* category included motivating factors for working with clients and being part of the counseling program. Motivating factors were described by counselor trainees as factors which helped them grow and become self-aware (i.e. self-focused motivation) and factors that focused on helping others (i.e., other-focused motivations). Despite the mixture of emotions ranging from fear to anxiety, counselor trainees seemed to share in their excitement of working with clients. One counselor trainee reported, "I'm excited about building relationships with people." Another one stated, "I love talking to people and hearing their worldview and seeing where they are coming from." While, yet another, stated that "We're all here because we like helping people." The main source of motivation was reported as an altruistic fulfillment stemming from helping clients.

Theme Four: Group Work

Group Work related to various aspects of competency related to the anticipation of facilitating groups. Counselor trainees shared their experiences pertaining to group counseling training, group facilitation, differences between individual and group counseling, lack of prior knowledge about group counseling, and other expectations.

Counselor trainees explained that their own experiences as group members in

counseling groups increased their knowledge and understanding of groups. One counselor trainee noted, "As I've been in group, it's starting to ease a little, because I see how groups, people, actually, kind of guide people in groups, and you facilitate discussion, and then the discussion kind of naturally just happens." However, they also recognized limitations of attending a counseling group with their peers: "Everyone [is] willing to talk, but in the real group, there might be some people that are not willing to talk and maybe they're mandated to participate in the group, so I think we have no chance to see that in the group right now." Counselor trainees also discussed their feelings regarding group facilitation, making mention of both individual and co-facilitation. More than half of the counselor trainees were in favor of co-facilitation, as it eased counselor trainees' fears regarding group work. For example, one counselor trainee noted, "If you are stuck, then they can pick up."

Counselor trainees further reflected on the differences between group counseling and individual counseling and brought up themes of seeing the two counseling mediums as separate entities. Some counselor trainees noted that group counseling seemed less intimidating than individual counseling. For example, one counselor trainee stated, "I don't think I will have that same 'stuck feeling' with group that I would have with individual, and you have other people helping you, rather than like 'I'm the main person someone's focusing on.'" On the other hand, counselor trainees noted that in-group counseling, the counselor will have more work to do. For example, one counselor trainee reflected:

You have to listen to what everyone is saying and really grasp each person's like feelings or thought and make sure they - that one person doesn't monopolize, and all those little things. You have to manage everything. Like in an individual setting, you're focusing on one person and one thing. You can give them your all. In group you have to give, you know, five to seven, eight people your all.

Counselor trainees also discussed their lack of prior knowledge of group counseling, identifying it as separate from counseling or not being aware of its existence. One counselor trainee noted, "When I think of counseling I always thought of individual, and it wasn't even until I was looking at the classes that we were gonna be taking in the master's program that groups even crossed my mind."

Theme Five: Ethical Considerations

The theme, *Ethical Considerations*, consisted of counselor trainees' perceived level of expectations, competence, and understanding of what ethics entailed in relation to working with future clients. For instance, counselor trainees' experiences included being hesitant but eager to learn how ethical dilemmas were applied and resolved in the counseling relationship. Additionally, they were unsure of the programmatic expectations for ethical competence and hoped their fears would be resolved once they enrolled

in the ethics course.

One counselor trainee who had taken the Ethical and Legal Issues in Counseling course offered in their program stated, “That class really opened my eyes up to what’s at stake as practicing seeing clients.” Despite this, the other counselor trainees, who had not taken the course, reported feelings of confidence that their questions would be answered throughout the ethics course. Additionally, feelings of being prepared for the ethics course, cultivated by varying in-class experiences in the program, were shared among the counselor trainees. For example, one individual stated, “In our different classes in each chapter there are snippets of ethical codes or dilemmas that we talk about, and that’s helpful.” Practical experience also appeared to be a mitigating factor for some of the concerns surrounding ethical decision-making. For instance, taking the ethics course directly before practicum appeared to ease some concerns “because it’s [ethics] fresh in your mind before you see clients.”

However, counselor trainees also reported understanding the ambiguity of certain ethical dilemmas. One counselor trainee explained, “There’s no clear answers [in this] gray area [of counseling] where a decision that is ethical, might not be legal and vice versa.” Some feelings of inadequacy were reported, especially on the topic of legality. However, self-awareness appeared to be a mitigating factor for these concerns, as mentioned by one counselor trainee: “It’s all about, self-awareness.” The counselor trainees varied somewhat regarding their apprehension of taking the ethics course. One counselor trainee stated that “[the gray areas are] so overwhelming sometimes for me.”

Theme Six: Multicultural Considerations

The theme, *Multicultural Considerations*, included counselor trainees’ descriptions of their self-efficacy regarding multicultural counseling competence, which included counselor competence and self-efficacy and views of people and diversity. The multicultural class evoked emotional responses for the counselor trainees, specifically in regard to frustrations that the course did not meet their expectations nor increased their self-efficacy and multicultural competence. One counselor trainee reported, “I feel like so stuck in that class. I get really frustrated. I know that everyone shares the same sentiment. There’s a lot of frustration with that class.”

Counselor trainees also shared their views on how important multicultural competencies were in understanding and contextualizing individuals, which was echoed in counselor trainees’ desires for more comprehensive multicultural competency training. One counselor trainee reported:

I think it’s very important to be aware and maybe like during intake to get as much of that information as you can because those things really shape a person and they react differently to different situations because of who they are and what they’ve learned and where they come from.

Theme Seven: Recommendations

Counselor trainees suggested several recommendations for the counselor education program. These recommendations included (a) increased opportunities for experiential and modeling activities, (b) increased opportunities for receiving feedback, (c) multicultural counseling course recommendations, (d) bridging the gap between theory and practice (e) opportunities for mentorship, and (f) use of technology. The recommendations were based on students' own experiences and what they felt was lacking and helpful in their own programs.

Increased opportunities for experiential and modeling activities. Counselor trainees reported that they learned from practical applications and experiential activities. One participant stated "I think I want more experiences," referring to methods of learning counseling skills. Counselor trainees also described that they wanted more experiences role playing as both clients and counselors, including experiences in the realm of group counseling. Additionally, counselor trainees reported wanting more opportunities to observe others, such as professors modeling counseling skills in class or viewing live counseling sessions.

Increased opportunities for receiving feedback. Beyond having more opportunities to participate in experiential activities, counselor trainees reported wanting to have more opportunities for feedback on their counseling skills and abilities. One counselor trainee reported, "Having his [the professor's] critique and that additional practice and learning certain types of skills for me was really beneficial. I need both." Counselor trainees agreed that having something like an outside "counseling skills club" would be helpful for not only practicing skills, but for receiving feedback as well.

Multicultural counseling course recommendations. Counselor trainees noted several recommendations specifically for the multicultural counseling course in their program. For instance, they stated that the course included a large quantity of material, so much so that they found it overwhelming. One counselor trainee reported, "I'm in multicultural right now and it's... I feel like we're not covering – there's so much to cover – I feel like doing it one semester is very overwhelming." Despite such a large amount of material being covered, counselor trainees still reported feeling frustrated that the class missed out on several other subcategories of multiculturalism that were not covered, such as "[...] martial status, religion, [and] sexuality [...]" which they experienced as under-represented topics in the course. Counselor trainees suggested implementing a second multicultural class, which would allow depth as well as breadth of information. One student reported, "And we have a lot of assignments and they're all really great but it's hard to cover everything and I almost wonder if it should be two classes."

Bridging the gap between theory and practice. Counselor trainees shared their difficulties of finding ways to bridge theory and practical application, which echoed their desires for more experiential learning. One counselor trainee stated, “We’re learning all of this, but then, how do we bridge it together?” Counselor trainees generally agreed that counseling courses relied heavily on theoretical practice and less on what might be considered real-life or applied counseling. Another counselor trainee reported that bridging theory and practice would help narrow the feared *gray areas* and allow students to better gain understanding of what *real_counseling* looks like. The counselor trainee explained, “I think we would get better insight into what’s practical, because we talk about that in school in general. Whether that’s group counseling or anything, like ‘that’s what the book says’ and ‘this is what real life is.’”

Opportunities for mentorship. Counselor trainees agreed that having a mentor would be beneficial in the counselor education program. In the present program, there is no formal mentorship, although counselor trainees frequently collaborate and establish informal mentorships with doctoral students and faculty. One counselor trainee reported,

I’m thinking of more mentorships where you can sit down with somebody and say these are my individual concerns and these are things I’m trying to process as far as being a student, future clients, future populations and what does the future look like in general and having someone you can process those things with. I do know being a counseling student, everyone comes in with different levels of thinking and different objectives and having someone to bounce those things off of will ease the stress.

This counselor trainee’s account highlights some of the concerns that counselor trainees had and how mentorship could potentially alleviate anxiety.

Use of technology. Counselor trainees reported that technology was helpful in developing counseling skills, and that technology could be utilized more. Specifically, counselor trainees described how video filming their own sessions with mock-clients helped them learn from their mistakes. One counselor trainee stated, “[...] when I was watching my tapes I’m like ‘hello’ there is the issue right there and I’m like ‘why didn’t I ask her more about that?’ but I was so focused on the other stuff [...]” Another counselor trainee added,

[...] you can like make the changes from one tape to the next. Like I remember my first tape I used the word “um” and “like” a lot like even when I wanted to think I’m like “ummmm” when instead I could just use silence. You know I don’t need to say um so like I tried

to fix that in my second tape.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate pre-practicum counselor trainees' lived experiences of counselor self-efficacy and competence as it related to main areas of counseling competence (CACREP, 2016). Seven themes were identified through the focus group investigation and included: (a) Counselor Fears, (b) Coping, (c) Motivation, (d) Group Work, (e) Ethical Considerations, (f) Multicultural Considerations, and (g) Recommendations. Previous research regarding counselor self-efficacy has greatly focused on counselor trainees' clinical experiences, largely neglecting the counselor preparation experiences they engage in *prior* to clinical work (e.g., Kozina et al., 2010). However, in agreement with the findings of Mullen and colleagues (2015) who identified that pre-clinical experiences in counseling students do, in fact, have a great impact on counselor self-efficacy, students in the present study reported that their coursework had indeed greatly affected their self-efficacy.

Results from the present study suggest that counselor fears were emphasized for pre-practicum counselor trainees in many areas, including facilitating group work, providing direction in counseling sessions, and effectively working with diverse clients. They manifested in mental noise, self-defeating thoughts, and inability to use skills as desired. However, pre-practicum counselor trainees noted that several elements greatly aided in their coping with feelings of inadequacy. For instance, consistent with findings by Bandura (1977) and Larson and Daniels (1998), experiential learning and modeling by others was seen as essential in developing self-efficacy. Furthermore, self-acceptance, integration and application of material, mentorship from students ahead of their class, multicultural awareness, and technology were described as important elements to increase counselor trainees' self-efficacy and prepare them for real clinical work. The pre-practicum counselor trainees in the study overwhelmingly stated they wanted increased experiences of these elements in their programs.

Implications for Counselor Education and Supervision

Involving students in their own evaluation and program evaluation can not only increase the working alliance and student involvement (Borders & Brown, 2005), but it can better inform educators and supervisors of (a) counselor trainees' self-efficacy and self-perceived competence, (b) possible discrepancies between students' and supervisors' evaluations, and (c) program strengths and weaknesses as they pertain to counselor trainees' self-perceived competencies. Their self-efficacy and experiences in their programs may help inform counselor educators and supervisors of experiences, training needs, and overall developmental processes.

Students reported many insights in terms of their self-efficacy and also identified several recommendations for the program that would address their needs as counselor trainees. By gaining counselor trainees' perspectives of training needs and competence,

counselor educators and supervisors may more adequately target the needs of their students and consequently influence the positive outcomes of their clients.

Experiential learning, modeling, and feedback. It is noteworthy that the counselor trainees in this study viewed experiential learning and modeling as instrumental in their development and their appreciation for such instructional methods. For instance, counselor trainees frequently reported fears regarding difficult client behaviors (e.g., judgment, silence), group work, timing of skills, mental noise and self-defeating thoughts, and problems with application. As noted by students, an overarching focus on integration of theory and practice was reported to increase students' self-efficacy as they were better able to understand the application of theoretical concepts and how said theoretical approach may practically manifest with clients. Focusing on specific fears during the foundational coursework using instructional methods that emphasize experiential learning, modeling, and feedback may increase self-efficacy for consequent work with clients while also increasing self-efficacy (McCarthy, 2014).

Mentorship. In line with McCarthy's (2014) findings, students in the present study identified value of mentors who were further along in the program than they were. While the researchers' institution does not offer participation in a formal mentoring program, counselor trainees might benefit from being part of such a program. In fact, research on leadership education suggest that mentoring has a positive impact on "professional growth, career advancement, and career mobility" (Inzer & Crawford, 2005, p. 36). In counseling programs, mentorship is seen as a relationship between a mentor and a protégé who are at different stages in their careers and who respect and support one another (Schwiebert, 2000). Mentoring relationships serve as a support for socialization and development of counselors (Black, Suarez, & Medina, 2004) and helps them strengthen their professional identity (Murdock, Stipanovic, & Lucas, 2013). Additionally, Clark, Harden, and Johnson (2000) found that clinical psychology students who had mentors tended to experience increased satisfaction with their program experience than did their non-mentored peers, suggesting similar implications for counseling students and further strengthening the argument for mentorship. Counselor educators might be able to meet some unmet needs of counselor trainees by establishing formal mentoring programs in their departments and by promoting the development of informal faculty-student mentoring relationships. Inzer and Crawford (2005) defined informal mentoring as a "natural coming together of a mentor and protégé... done in friendship, through personal and professional respect and admiration from each to the other" (p. 33). Informal mentorship is a valuable relationship that is often more long-lasting and beneficial than formal mentoring relationships (Inzer & Crawford, 2005), and one which was part of the process for many counselor trainees in the present study who frequently reached out to doctoral students and other peers. However, informal mentoring also requires opportunity and access and may be difficult for certain students who do not feel comfortable initiating such relationships. Thus, formal mentorship provides an opportunity and equal access for all students to engage in mentorship

experiences.

Multicultural competency. Further, the discussion of multiculturalism and multicultural competency was a prevalent theme in our findings. Counselor trainees reported that multiculturalism is essential to trainee development and self-efficacy, but that perhaps not enough time is programmatically allotted to the subject. Therefore, counselor training programs might benefit from considering how more time and resources could be dedicated to the topic of multiculturalism in a training program. Researchers such as Arredondo and Arciniega (2001) propose strategies on infusing multiculturalism into counselor training, and suggest that counselor training programs consider imparting the three main areas of multicultural competence (i.e., counselor awareness of own cultural values and biases; counselor awareness of clients' worldview; and culturally appropriate intervention strategies) into all areas of counselor training. Arredondo and Arciniega (2001) provide several strategies for such integration (e.g., counselor trainee autobiographies, social and cultural examinations) which may prove helpful in creating a continuous atmosphere of multicultural competence.

Overall, receiving feedback on program strengths and weaknesses may in turn help programs become stronger and more student-centered. Receiving student feedback provides counselor training programs the opportunity for students to address their unmet needs both in and out of the classroom, which in turn may significantly impact student self-efficacy and client outcome. Therefore, we recommend that counselor training programs provide a forum for students to provide regular programmatic feedback which is used toward program development and evaluation. Examples of such forums may include (a) biannual programmatic feedback by students, (b) biannual assessment of the program, accounting for students' feedback, (c) biannual retreats to enhance relationships between faculty and students and to establish a culture of openness and approachability, (d) student representatives who attend faculty meetings and provide insight into students' needs, (e) active program organizations or student chapters (e.g., CSI [Chi Sigma Iota] International Counseling Honor Society) that promote the involvement and collaboration of master's students, doctoral students, and faculty.

Limitations and Future Research

There were some limitations with this study. While a wide range of ethnicities were represented in the sample, the sample size in this study was small. In addition, the sample was limited to one counselor education program. Further, trustworthiness would have been strengthened by using multiple data sources rather than one data collection method. An important point to note is that counselor trainees were in various stages of their program development, which may have influenced each student's response and experience regarding self-efficacy and the overall program involvement. Future studies may investigate students in a cohort model or at the same level of program progress.

It was not the goal of the present study to generalize findings or to make recommendations for all counseling programs, but rather to illustrate the experiences of students from a specific counseling program and to demonstrate the need for students to be involved in program evaluation. Nevertheless, it is important for readers to keep in mind, when interpreting the results and recommendations, that the findings reflect those of a specific program and not those in all counseling programs; students in different counseling programs doubtlessly face unique experiences and challenges. Furthermore, the researchers were involved in dual relationships with some of the counselor trainees (e.g., colleagues, students, and advisees) outside of the present investigation, which possibly influenced analyses of the data. Future studies might use the findings from the present investigation as a springboard for more in-depth and larger-scale studies.

In addition, future studies may include larger more representative sample sizes from a variety of counselor education programs to examine if themes from this study are replicable. Finally, outcome measures that examine the effects of the involvement of counselor trainees in program and self-evaluation may be an important step.

Conclusion

The present study highlights counselor trainees' perceptions of self-efficacy in the core areas of counselor competence (CACREP, 2016). Counselor trainees shared experiences regarding both challenging and helpful aspects of their training, and findings suggest that several components comprised counselor trainees' experiences and reflected their self-efficacy in anticipation of clinical work. These components included: (a) Counselor Fears, (b) Coping, (c) Motivation, (d) Group Work, (e) Ethical Considerations, (f) Multicultural Considerations, and (g) Recommendations. Findings of the present study helped gain qualitative perspectives on the lived experiences of counselor trainees as they anticipated working with clients. Furthermore, it delineated counselor trainees' experiences of self-efficacy in specific counseling competency areas, highlighting both helpful and challenging aspects that can be targeted in training and program evaluation. The findings in the present study demonstrate a need to involve students in their own learning and evaluation processes and to continue to investigate and apply students' feedback to program structure and training.

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