The Effect of a Field-Based Counselor Internship on the Perceived Self-Efficacy of Basic Helping and Procedural Skills Among Counseling Interns

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Abstract

A counselor's self-efficacy appears to be an important component in the transition from student to practicing professional. The goal of this study was to examine changes in the self-efficacy of counseling interns after one semester of a field-based learning experience. Results are based on 41 participants enrolled in a masters level counseling program. Students completed the Self-Assessment of Basic Helping Skills and Procedural Skills at the beginning and conclusion of their first semester of a field-based counseling internship. Students' self-efficacy increased after one semester of field experience.
For more than a decade, the training of counselors has included a two-semester, field based internship. These internships have generally followed Goodlad's (1984) model of professional development for educational renewal that provided a full academic year of supervised experience prior to induction into the teaching profession. The field-based experience in counselor education programs introduces students to multiple roles and models of practice, which in turn can facilitate skill acquisition and may increase students' competence and self-efficacy.

Numerous studies have examined counseling interns self-efficacy on a variety of measures ranging from skill-level acquisition to the impact of anxiety on the performance of various counseling related tasks (Barnes, 2004; Daniels & Larson, 2001; Larson & Daniels, 1998; Lent, Hill, and Hoffman, 2003; Sutton & Fall, 1995). Studies have examined how supervisors' expectations impact student counselors' self-efficacy (Friedlander & Snyder, 1983; Ladany, Ellis, & Friedlander, 1999; Tang, Addison, LaSure-Bryant, Norman, O'Connell, & Stewart-Sicking, 2004). Belief in one's ability to perform successfully was also found to influence students' decisions to engage in counseling careers after graduation (Heppner, O'Brien, Hinkelman, & Flores, 1996).

Studies indicate that self-efficacy is an important component in the transition from student to practicing professional. The goal of this study was to explore the effect of a field-based learning experience on the perceived self-efficacy of basic helping and procedural skills among counseling interns after one semester of a field-based internship.

Review of Literature
The learning process engaged in by the counselor trainee was described by Hogan (1964) as a sequence of developmental steps acquired in an actual clinical setting. This clinically based model was designed to facilitate the counselor trainee's transition from student status to that of a practicing professional. Experience gained in real world settings appears to be a necessary component in the acquisition of skills required of an entry-level counselor. In 1990, the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision recommended that counseling programs incorporate service learning into their curricula by means of collaborative partnerships between universities, community agencies, and public schools. This practice appears to create an immediate link between concepts taught in the classroom and field experiences (Barbee, Scherer, & Combs, 2003).

Field Based Experience

Field-based learning models are believed to provide interns the opportunity to develop counseling skills and roles, as well as increase self-efficacy (Larson, 1998; Larson & Daniels, 1998; Urbani, Smith, Maddux, Smaby, Tores-Rivera, & Crews, 2002). The field-based internship allows students to experience four areas that influence students' self-efficacy (Larson, Suzuki, Gillespie, Potenza, Bechtel, & Toulouse, 1992). These include (a) successful performance of specific behaviors, (b) observing others perform successfully, (c) verbal instructions on how to perform specific behaviors, and (d) levels of anxiety that might inhibit performance. Participation in a field-based internship impacts the development of counselor identity or the students' belief in their ability to perform skills required to become an effective counselor. Through modeling, performance feedback, self-evaluation, and working with clients in a real world setting students are provided the opportunity to develop competence and confidence in their therapeutic abilities.
**Modeling.** Studies indicated that a powerful method for facilitating students' self-efficacy is to observe someone else successfully demonstrate a specific behavior and then master the same behavior. For advanced students, role-play if related to real client sessions appears to increase self-efficacy more than observing training videotapes (Larson, Clark, Wesely, Koraleski, Daniels, and Smith, 1999). Due to the complexity of many counseling tasks, modeling diminishes ambiguity and provides encouragement and confidence in skill building. Modeling also appears to lead to a stronger supervisor-supervisee alliance, especially when the supervisor works from a collaborative approach.

**Performance evaluation.** One of the factors affecting self-efficacy is the students’ ability to effectively and accurately self-evaluate students’ application of appropriate intervention skills (Johnson, Baker, Ropala, Kiselica, & Thompson, 1989). Thus a goal for supervisors is to assist counseling interns in developing competence in self-monitoring, which includes balancing between being overly confident or overly critical (Barnes, 2004; Heppner, et al., 1998; Larson, 1998). As with other counseling skills, modeling by peers and supervisors is an effective way to demonstrate appropriate self-evaluation skills.

Effective feedback has been found to improve performance, interaction with clients, and self-efficacy (Daniels & Larson, 2001; Ladany, et al., 1999). It is critical for the supervisor and supervisee to establish clear, measurable, and mutually agreed upon goals. Effective feedback is provided in a timely manner allowing for student response and is based on direct observation containing a balance of positive and critical statements. Ongoing effective supervision and the strength of the working alliance between supervisor and intern also appear to increase self-efficacy (Ladany, et al., 1999; Melchert, Hays, Wiljanen, & Kolocek 1996).
Working experience. The field-based learning experience appears to improve the transition from student to practitioner by allowing for increased perception of competence through practice in a real world setting (Boyland, Malley & Scott, 1995). The field experience should include interaction with both the clinical and site supervisor, which provides students the opportunity to observe various perspectives and approaches of practice in working with clients. Cashwell and Dooley (2001) found that while consistent on-going supervision provides the feedback, structure, and support that are critical factors in skill development and self-efficacy, it was unclear if the increase in self-efficacy was due to the feedback received from the supervisors, or if it was having someone to discuss difficult cases with.

Anxiety concerning the ability to apply appropriate assessment and intervention skills is a factor found to decrease self-efficacy (Friedlander, Keller, Peca-Baker, & Olk, 1986; Leach & Stoltenberg, 1997). A field-based experience provides the opportunity for counseling students to acquire and polish therapeutic skills; develop a strategy for how to work with clients who present issues that are unfamiliar to them; and perform effectively. According to Larson and Daniels (1998), student counselors with high self-efficacy demonstrated more positive expectations and self-evaluations with fewer anxieties.

Self-Perception

The development of competence in performing therapeutic skills is influenced not only by the educational experience, but also how the counseling student perceives his/her ability to perform effectively (Bandura, 1991; Kirsch, 1986; Larson & Daniels, 1998). Students with a strong belief in their ability to perform the multiple skills required to be an effective counselor, have demonstrated the ability to put these skills into action in the counseling setting (Scott, 1995; Urbani, et al., 2002). Internship is a highly individualized learning experience in which a
students’ success is dependent upon the level of their professional development and their
perception of the knowledge and skills they bring to the experience. Self-efficacy can influence
the level of involvement that a student exhibits in the internship experience. Welsh (1999) found
interns that actively engage in the internship experience increase their self-efficacy. Not only
does self-efficacy impact the counselor's level of participation, but it also appears that the
counselor's confidence level influences the client's willingness to participate in the therapeutic
process (Melchert, et al., 1996).

There are numerous studies defining self-efficacy, the variables that influence self-efficacy,
the role of self-efficacy in the transition from student to practitioner, and how field based
internship experiences can optimize the development of self-efficacy. Yet there appears to be a
need to examine the students’ awareness of their changing levels of self-efficacy during a field-
based learning experience. The goal of this study was to explore this issue, with the belief that
the data would be useful in demonstrating the validity of a field-based model in the training of
counselors.

Methodology

Participants

Participants for this study were 41 master's degree counseling students enrolled in their first
semester of internship during Summer 2004, Fall 2004, or Spring 2005 semesters. Of the 41
participants, 31 completed their internship in school settings and 10 in community settings.

Source of the Data

Data was derived from the Self-Assessment of Basic Skills and Procedural Skills (SABSPS)
(Scott, 1995). The SABSPS is a 31-item 5-point Lykert-type instrument that "provides the
trainee with an opportunity to review levels of competency in the performance skill areas of
basic helping skills and procedural skills" (Scott 1995, Appendix 5.1). The self-assessment consists of 25-items addressing attending, listening, empathetic understanding, assessing, reflecting, summarizing, interpreting, and confronting skills and 6-items concerning specific procedures of the counseling interview.

Procedure and Analysis

Students were asked to complete the Self-Assessment of Basic Skills and Procedural Skills at the beginning and at the conclusion the semester of their Internship 1 field-based experience. Because the data were interval, univariate, inferential, and derived from one group, a paired-sample t-test was used to analyze changes in mean scores from pre-test to post-test. For the purposes of this study, the level of significance (alpha-level) was set at $p < 0.05$. All statistical tests were significant and indicated an increase in the student's perception of competence for each of the 31-items, as well as the scores for the complete assessment.

Limitations of the Study

A limitation of the study is that the counseling interns are all students at one institution. This limitation combined with the small sample size limits the generalizability of the study.

Discussion

Research has shown that self-efficacy is an important component in the transition from student to practicing professional. The result of this study appears to indicate that counseling interns' confidence in their ability to perform basic counseling skills and to conduct the counseling interview increases after one semester of field-based learning experience.

It seems logical that confidence would increase with practice and experience. However, it appears that one cannot assume that the field-based experience in itself will increase self-efficacy. Based on the research it seems important that counselor educators and supervisors note
the numerous variables that influence the increase and decrease in a counseling intern's self-efficacy. Understanding the elements that foster the development of appropriate and accurate self-assessment and self-efficacy is critical for counselor educators as it can provide valuable information that can be incorporated into the internship process, which may enrich the field-based learning experience.

**Future Research**

While positive self-efficacy is a critical element in a student's ability to transition successfully from intern to practitioner, it also seems important to verify the accuracy of their self-concept. Either an overestimated or underestimated awareness of one's ability and skill level could adversely impact the counseling process. Additional studies might include (a) comparison of the instructor and supervisor's evaluation of the student's ability with the student's self-evaluation, (b) exploration of counseling intervention effectiveness and counselor's level of self-efficacy, and (c) examination of post internship self-efficacy levels to those completing their first year of practice.

**References**


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