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The Impact of Skills-Based Training on Counselor Locus of Control and Emotional Intelligence

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Personality traits of counselor trainees have been shown to be important in the counseling relationship (Little, Packman, Smaby, & Maddux, 2005; Ritter et al., 2002). In addition, research provides support that changes in personality traits occur in counseling students during training (Duys & Hedstrom, 2000; Little et al., 2005). Skills-based programs have influenced trainee personality traits including counseling cognitive complexity, self-efficacy, and accurate self-assessment (Duys & Hedstrom, 2000; Kruger & Dunning, 1999; Little et al., 2005; Urbani et al., 2002; Smaby et al., 2005).

Counselor education programs should consider adopting training programs that assist students in mastering counseling skills and offer students the opportunity to develop personality traits that can increase their effectiveness. Numerous studies have demonstrated that systematic training based on skills mastery improves trainees' group and individual skills and ability to make accurate self-assessments (Crews et al., 2005; Duys & Hedstrom, 2000; Little et al., 2005; Smaby, Maddux, Torres-Rivera, & Zimmick, 1999; Urbani et al., 2002; Zimmick, Smaby, & Maddux, 2000). These studies lead to questioning whether a skills-based training model may also affect additional personality traits including emotional intelligence and locus of control.

The Skilled Counseling Training Model (SCTM) is a training program that promotes attainment of skills through the use of modeling, mastery, persuasion, arousal, and supervisory feedback. In the SCTM, skills are divided into three stages: exploring, understanding, and acting (Smaby et al., 1999).

The exploring stage involves working with a simulated client to identify a problem. During this stage, trainees learn basic counseling skills, practice these skills, and assess their own and others' performance. In the understanding stage, training is focused on understanding the interaction between counselor and client and conceptualizing the client's problem. The focus of the acting stage is on developing a plan of action for resolving the problem. At this stage, the trainee develops the ability to encourage change in the client through personal influence (Little et al., 2005).

This present study's purpose was to determine if SCTM training results in (a) mastering skills measured by the Skilled Counseling Scale (SCS; Smaby et al., 1999), (b) accurate self-assessment measured by the SCS, (c) gains in internal locus of control measured by the Levenson Locus of Control Scale (LLOCS; Levenson, 1973), and (d) gains in emotional intelligence measured by the Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale (SEIS; Schutte et al., 1998). The following hypotheses were tested:

1. SCTM-trained students (experimental group) will have better counseling skills than students not SCTM-trained (control group), as measured by the SCS.
2. SCTM and non-SCTM trained groups will rate themselves higher than expert raters on the SCS pretest.
3. There will be no difference in the SCS posttest self-ratings of the SCTM group and the ratings of expert raters.
4. The non-SCTM trained group will rate themselves higher than expert raters on the SCS posttest.
5. SCTM trained counselors will have higher internal locus of control scores than non-SCTM trained students measured by the LLOCS.
6. SCTM trained students will have higher emotional intelligence scores than non-SCTM trained students measured by the SEIS.

Method

Participants

A total of 43 participants, 38 women and 5 men, were included. They were master's students in a counseling program accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP).

The average age of participants was 30.1 years. The experimental group consisted of 33 students in three sections of the Introduction to Counseling course that included SCTM training. The ten students in the control group completed a section of the Introduction to Counseling course that did not include SCTM training.

Instruments

The Skilled Counseling Scale (SCS) assesses a set of 18 counseling skills subdivided into three sequential stages (exploring, understanding, and acting) of six skills each. The skill set is composed of observable behaviors evaluated by skilled raters viewing video recordings of counseling sessions. Scoring employs a five level, Likert-type scale: 1 = *not at all*, 2 = *a little*, 3 = *somewhat*, 4 = *a great deal*, 5 = *always*. Aggregate scores range from 18 to 90, with higher scores indicating more frequent and proficient use of the skills. Crews et al. (2005) report pretest/posttest reliabilities of .90 and .98 respectively.

The Levenson Locus of Control Scale (LLOCS; Levenson, 1973) measures two components of external locus of control: a disordered world (fate/chance) and an ordered world controlled by others (powerful others). It consists of three scales of eight Likert-type items each (Internal, Powerful others, Chance). Responses range from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Reliability coefficients were calculated and were .67 for the internal scale, .82 for the powerful others scale, and .79 for the chance scale. Test-retest reliabilities of .74, .78 and .80 were found for the chance, powerful others, and the internal scale.

The Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale (SEIS) was developed by Schutte et al. (1998). The SEIS provides a tool to rank emotional intelligence, defined as “the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p. 189).

The SEIS contains indicators for intrapersonal and interpersonal orientation and functioning. Respondents use a five-level Likert-type scale with choices of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) to respond to 33 statements. Global scores range from 33 to 165 with higher scores indicating higher emotional intelligence. Schutte et al. (1998) report an internal consistency of .90 and a test-retest reliability of .78.

Design and Procedure

Three sections of a three-credit graduate counseling course were included for the experimental group. The Introduction to Counseling course taught the 33 participants the SCTM. Each student received a total of 12 3-hour class periods of SCTM training and 9 hours of other classroom instruction. A full professor and doctoral students trained in the SCTM taught the three sections. The first class involved pre-testing the students with the SCS, LLOC, and the SEIS. Students were also given an introduction to the SCTM. The next 12 class periods consisted of four training components: (a) exploring stage (2 weeks), (b) understanding stage (5 weeks), (c) acting stage (2 weeks) and (d) exploring, understanding, and acting stages (2 weeks). The final class was involved post-testing students on the same instruments.

The control group consisted of 10 students who completed an Introduction to Counseling class that did not include SCTM training. The control group was pre- and post-tested using the same procedures.

Pretesting and Posttesting. During the first class, students participated in a 5-minute, video-recorded mock counseling session. During this session they were to act as

the counselor and a trained SCTM rater acted as a client. The participants were asked to demonstrate as many of the counseling skills on the SCS as possible. After session, participants rated their own counseling skills on the SCS. Participants also completed the LLOC, and SEIS. The average of two expert raters' scores was used as the rater's score. At the next class meeting, students received the raters' score as well as their self-rated score on the SCS. They were also given the class mean and standard deviation. Posttests were conducted at the last class period with an identical format.

Experimental Treatment. After pretests, instruction included a report on the effectiveness of the SCTM model, and an overview of the SCS. Students were then divided into two small groups. Each group was led by a doctoral student trained in the SCTM. This training involved students forming dyads for counselor-trainee skills practice before the group. Students were given a list of 30 feeling and content statements representing issues faced by graduate counseling students such as "I feel overwhelmed with the demands of graduate school." Students were told to use these statements when acting as a client in the training. The trainer provided feedback and supervision for the counselor-trainee on the use of the skills.

Students were grouped into pairs with one student acting as counselor-trainee and the other acting as the client using one of the "I feel" statements as the presenting problem. The counselor-trainee had 5 minutes to demonstrate the first six skills with the student-client while being video recorded before the small group. After the counselor-trainee attempted to demonstrate all six skills, the video was replayed and critiqued. The counselor-trainees were asked to demonstrate again any poorly performed skills.

During the understanding stage training sessions students were engaged in developing a deeper understanding of the problem, and recognizing attitude and behavior of the client that inhibited positive change. The counselor-trainee performed the six understanding stage skills with the student-client for 5 minutes in front of the group. These sessions were not recorded. The counselor-trainee received feedback from the trainer and group.

After students had mastered both the exploring and understanding stages skills, training sessions were aimed at learning the acting stage skills. Students performed the acting stage skills in pairs while receiving feedback from the trainer and group members.

The final training sessions emphasized the use and mastery of all 18 skills. The last class period was dedicated to the posttests (video and written).

In summary, SCTM participants received a total of 36 hours of small group training and 9 hours of classroom instruction. The program consisted of pretests and posttests of counseling skills and personality assessments, introduction to SCTM, and skills training for the exploring, understanding and acting stages.

Control group treatment. The control group included ten participants who did not have knowledge of the SCTM. Each student participated in the same video and written assessments.

Results

Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 stated that students trained in the SCTM (experimental group) would have better counseling skills than students not trained in the SCTM program (control group), as measured by scores on the SCS. Posttest raters' scores were as follows: experimental group, $M = 82.21$, $SD = 5.38$; control group, $M = 44.10$, $SD = 4.53$). Since the data was ordinal, a Mann-Whitney U Test was conducted and the results were found to be significant ($U = .001$, $z = -4.752$, $p < .001$).

Hypotheses 2, 3, and 4

Hypothesis 2 stated SCTM and non-SCTM trained groups would rate themselves higher than expert raters on the SCS pretest. Both groups at pretest rated themselves significantly higher than the expert raters (experimental pretest ($N = 33$), $M = 42.09$, $SD = 13.97$; expert rater pretest experimental ($N = 33$), $M = 3.86$, $SD = 5.96$; $z = -3.52$, $p = <.01$); (control pretest ($N = 10$), $M = 59.70$, $SD = 10.89$; expert rater pretest control ($M = 44.40$, $SD = 9.19$; $z = -2.193$, $p <.05$). In the present study, Hypothesis 2 is supported.

Hypothesis 3 stated that there would be no difference in the SCS posttest self-ratings of the SCTM (experimental) group and the ratings of expert raters. The SCTM (experimental) group was found to rate itself significantly lower than the expert raters at posttest (experimental posttest ($N = 33$), $M = 73.12$, $SD = 11.48$; expert rater posttest, $M = 82.21$, $SD = 5.38$; $z = -3.79$, $p <.01$). Hypothesis 3 is not supported.

Hypothesis 4 stated that the non-SCTM trained group would rate themselves higher than expert raters on the SCS posttest. The control group was found to rate itself significantly higher than the expert raters (control self post ($N = 10$), $M = 61.40$, $SD = 10.32$; expert rater post control $M = 44.10$, $SD = 4.53$, $z = -2.65$, $p <.01$). Hypothesis 4 is supported.

Hypothesis 5

Hypothesis 5 stated that counselor trainees who complete the SCTM training will have higher internal locus of control scores than non-SCTM trained students as measured by the LLOCS. The means of the experimental and control groups were measured at pretest (control group, $M = 84.40$, $SD = 7.20$; experimental group, $M = 91.33$, $SD = 6.45$) and at posttest (control group, $M = 88.70$, $SD = 7.80$; experimental group, $M = 93.27$, $SD = 7.53$). These results were found to be nonsignificant. A Mann-Whitney U test on gains scores within groups was also found not to be significant ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 6.06$, $U = 116.50$, $z = -1.40$, $p >.05$). Hypothesis 5 is not supported.

Hypothesis 6

Hypothesis 6 stated that counselor trainees who complete SCTM training will have higher emotional intelligence scores than non-SCTM trained students as measured by the SEIS. Mann-Whitney U test results for control versus experimental scores at posttest was not significant ($U = 131.50$, $z = -.84$, $p = .41$). A Mann-Whitney U test on

gains scores within the groups was also found not to be significant ($M = -.10$, $SD = 5.55$, $U = 133.50$, $z = -.79$, $p > .05$). Hypothesis 6 is not supported.

Discussion

Hypothesis 1 was supported. Numerous studies have demonstrated that systematic counselor training based on skills mastery improves trainees' group and individual counseling skills (Crews et al., 2005; Duys & Hedstrom, 2000; Little et al., 2005; Smaby, Maddux, Torres-Rivera, & Zimmick, 1999; Urbani et al., 2002; Zimmick, Smaby, & Maddux, 2000). These results continue to support the use of counseling skills training as an effective means of mastering counseling skills. Counselor educators should consider adopting training programs such as the Skilled Counselor Training Model (SCTM) that has shown consistently that it leads to skills mastery and accurate self-appraisal of counseling skills performance.

Hypothesis 2 was supported. Both groups rated themselves higher on the SCS pretest. Researchers who have studied how people make self-assessments have found that when people are asked to assess their own social and intellectual abilities, they generally *overestimate* both aptitude and performance. This may occur for some because they have not developed the *metacognitive skills* (the ability to think about their own thought processes) necessary for accuracy (Kruger & Dunning, 1999).

Hypothesis 3 was not supported. When people receive training that helps them become aware of the common tendency to overrate one's own performance, low performers judge their performance more realistically while high performers who judge their earlier performance too harshly become more positive and accurate (Djikic, Peterson, & Zelazo, 2004). SCTM training involved many opportunities to evaluate oneself and others with ongoing guidance. Students learned to become more accurate in their assessment and more critical than expert raters. This finding is also consistent with other studies of posttest SCS ratings.

Hypothesis 4 was supported. As illustrated in the discussions of Hypothesis 2 and 3, the non-SCTM trained counselors continued to overrate their performance. This may be because they did not receive training in rating based upon clear criteria.

Both Hypotheses 5 and 6 were not supported. SCTM training did not result in student gains for internal control or emotional intelligence. This is somewhat surprising since SCTM training in other studies has resulted in gains of other personality traits related to counseling. These traits include counseling self-efficacy (Urbani et al., 2002), self-monitoring behavior (Crews et al., 2005), and counselor cognitive complexity (Little et al., 2005). Counseling students in the earlier studies were in advanced counseling classes. The SCTM-trained students in this study were enrolled in an introduction to counseling class. Perhaps counselor educators should consider scheduling SCTM or similar counseling skills in the latter stages of students' programs of study. This might allow students to focus not only on skills training, but also on the impact this training may have upon personality traits related to the counseling profession.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. One is that participants were enrolled in one master's degree counseling program in a mid-sized university. Thus, the results may not generalize to other populations. Additionally, participants were in classroom units and not randomly assigned to control and experimental groups. The number of participants in the control group was small. Finally, while the students in the experimental group were at the beginning of the master's program, the students in the control group were at more advanced levels of degree completion.

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