



Counseling Skills Pre-Practicum Training at Guidance and Counseling Undergraduate Programs: A Qualitative Investigation

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Abstract

This study was aimed to describe counseling skills pre-practicum training at guidance and counseling undergraduate programs in Turkey. A descriptive study was conducted based upon qualitative data. The research group of this study consisted of 11 guidance and counseling undergraduate programs voluntarily participate into study. The Survey Form developed by the researcher and consisted of 10 open-ended questions was used. A content analysis was carried out. The results showed that undergraduate programs mostly aimed to teach therapeutic conditions and reflection of content/feeling skills in the course; did not use a counseling skills training program as a base and mostly used instruction method to teach counseling skills; and implemented paper-pencil tests to assess counseling skills. Teaching basic counseling skills and developing professional identity and self-efficacy were mostly emphasized as an importance of course for counselor education. One of the main problems of undergraduate programs regarding pre-practicum counseling skills training course was excessive number of students. In the light of results, it could be stated that the counseling skills pre-practicum training was not conducted in a qualitative manner within the scope of counselor education in Turkey. The results were discussed regarding counseling skills training and counselor education and suggestions were provided.

Key Words

Counselor Education, Counseling Skills, Counseling Skills Training, Counseling Skills Training Programs, Specific Methods of Counseling Skills Training

Counseling can be seen as the vehicle of development, change and life enhancement in individuals' life. Therefore, in counseling process, a skillful counselor can help clients who want to develop themselves and make changes in their lives (Hack-

ney & Cormier, 2009). For an effective counseling process, a skillful counselor should have some professional skills. These professional skills include different types of skills such as relationship, helping/counseling, case conceptualization, diagnosis, strategies, and interventions (Cormier & Hackney, 2008; Hackney & Cormier). These skills are described as competencies ranging from the basic and simple level to the more advanced and complex, therefore more challenging level (Cormier & Nurius, 2003; Seligman, 2005; Sexton, 2000; Whiston & Coker, 2000) and examined in different ways. For instance, Winston and Coker operationalized these skills in the dimensions of (a) technical skills, (b) therapeutic approaches and interventions, (c) counselor cognitive skill development. Technical

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skills are defined as what a counselor say and do in counseling process to help his/her clients. The term technical skills apply to those communication skills, listening skills/responses, basic interviewing skills, helping/counseling skills. These skills involve different types of skills such as questions, reflection of feeling, confrontation and self-disclosure (Hill, 2004; Ivey & Ivey, 2003; Whiston & Coker). Cognitive skills refer to the level of cognitive complexity of a counselor (Duys & Hedstrom, 2000). Seligman (2005) defined these skills as conceptual skills. Conceptual skills are those that influence how clinicians think about their clients and to identify effective ways to help their clients (Duys & Hedstrom; Hackney & Cormier; Seligman, 2005). Therapeutic approaches and interventions include counseling theories and the skills to implement the different strategies, interventions and techniques of those theories (Corey, 2005; Cormier & Hackney; Hackney & Cormier; Seligman, 2006). In summary, it is expected that effective counselor should be qualified in each skill dimension and integrate this competence with his/her work successfully. In this respect, the most important work of counselor educators is to teach these skills to the novice counselors.

This research is aimed to reveal technical skills pre-practicum training at guidance and counseling undergraduate programs in Turkey. As stated before, technical skills are called in different names in the literature. In this article, counseling skills/counseling skills training are being used instead of technical skills/technical skills training since it is observed that these terms have been used relatively common in Turkish literature.

The definition of counseling skills and the development of counseling skills training programs were all based loosely on the foundation of Rogers' (1992) contribution to the counselor education (Daniels, 1994; Hill & Lent, 2006). Since 1960's, numerous counseling skills training programs have been developed to teach discrete counseling skills (Baker, Daniels, & Greeley, 1990; Carkhuff, 2000; Hill, 2004; Hill & O'Brien, 1999; Ivey & Ivey, 2003). Counseling skills training programs classify counseling skills using a three stage framework: (a) self-exploration, (b) understanding/insight, (c) action (eg. Carkhuff, 2000; Hill, 2004). For example, Hill classify skills as exploration skills (e.g. attending, open questions, reflection of feeling), insight skills (e.g. challenges, interpretation, self-disclosure), and action skills (e.g. information and direct guidance (Hill et al., 2008) Besides, counsel-

ing skills are also arranged in two dimensions: (a) basic counseling skills, (b) advanced/influencing/higher order counseling skills (Bradley & Fiorini, 1999; Cormier & Nurius, 2003; Ivey & Ivey; Whiston & Cooker, 2000). Basic counseling skills include attending, questions, encouraging, reflection of content, reflection of feeling, and summarizing. Advanced counseling skills also include confrontation, self-disclosure, interpretation, immediacy, information, feedback, and directives (Bradley & Fiorini; Cormier & Nurius; Ivey & Ivey; Whiston & Cooker).

Since 1960's, numerous systematic and structured counseling skills training programs have been developed to teach counseling skills to the novice counselors. The main goal of counselor educators seems to discover the effectiveness of training programs and the best methods for training. As a matter of fact, varied in their views of learning, approaches to training and their empirical support, four stand out as most useful to counselor educators: Carkhuff's Human Relations Training (HRT), Ivey's Microcounseling/Microtraining (MC), Kagan's Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR) and Hill's Helping Skills Program (HSP) (Daniels, 1994; Hill & Lent, 2006; Hill, Stahl, & Roffman, 2007; Ladany & Inman, 2008). It is believed that the key components of counseling skills training programs are specific methods of counseling skills training. The specific methods of counseling skills training are (a) instruction (brief didactic information about the target skill), (b) reading-programmed texts (reading about the skill), (c) modeling (demonstrations of appropriate ways to perform the target skill), (d) rehearsal-practice (practice the target skill-role-playing), (e) self-observation (watching one self on videotape/transcribing and coding taped role-play/session), (f) self-assessment (reflect on experiences), and (g) feedback-supervision (Daniels; Hill & Lent; Hill et al. 2007; Ivey & Ivey, 2003; Ivey, Packard, & Ivey, 2006). Each specific method has unique functions and contributions to teach counseling skills. The research found that multimethod training outperforming single-method training (Hill & Lent). At the same time, the literature reveals significant interest in the use of multimedia instruction in counselor education (Hayes & Robinson, 2000; Hayes, Taub, Robinson, & Sivo, 2003). The concrete indicator or evidence of effectiveness of counseling skills training is the assessment of counseling skills after training. For measuring/assessing counseling skills, the paper-pencil tests (written examinations) and/or performance based tests (simulation/role-playing tests,

video tests) are conducted. However, the paper-pencil tests seem to be most suitable for the efficient assessment of knowledge while performance based tests are more suitable for the efficient assessment of insight and skill (Baker, O'Neill, & Linn, 1993; Smith & Van Der Molen, 1996a, 1996b). To make an adequate assessment, it is recommended the use of performance based tests in combination with paper-pencil tests (Hill & Lent; Smith & Van Der Molen, 1996a, 1996b).

In conclusion, it is highlighted that counseling skills training is important because it provides novice counselors with a concrete, but relatively simple framework that helps them to understand counseling process and for this reason, counseling skills training is accepted as first step (pre-practicum training) in counselor education. Furthermore, counseling skills training is typically implemented prior to supervision and practicum training (The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Programs [CACREP], 2009; Hill & Lent, 2006; Ladany & Inmann, 2008; Whiston & Coker, 2000). Counseling skills training is provided through courses in one or two semesters with titles such as "Helping Skills", "Counseling Skills", and "Counseling Techniques" in CACREP accredited counselor education programs (Cormier & Hackney, 2008; Duys & Hedstrom, 2000; Hill & Lent, 2006; Levitov, Fall, & Jennings, 1999). As summarized in this article, since 1960's, studies regarding counseling skills training have been conducted with students at upper-level undergraduates in counseling-related courses and master's-level students in beginning pre-practicum courses (Hill & Lent), these studies could be accepted as an indicator about how these courses conducted in counselor education programs.

In Turkey, there is a lack of standardized criteria upon counselor education and for this reason there are no formally recognized procedures for and official accreditation of counselor education programs (Doğan, 1996, 2000, 2001; Korkut, 2006). Regarding counseling skills training, it is known that some of the acknowledged counseling skills training programs developed abroad have been used such as Carkhuff's Human Relations Training, Egan's Skilled Helper Model and some of the source books of training programs also adapted (Carkhuff, 1999; Danish, Augelli, & Hauer, 1994; Egan, 1994, 1997; Voltan-Acar, 1989, 1993, 1998, 2003a). **Besides, there is little research about counseling skills training.** Studies focusing counseling skills training in counselor education are very

limited (Aladağ & Bektaş, 2007; Bektaş & Aladağ, 2005; Meydan, 2010; Voltan-Acar & Bilge, 1992 as cited in Voltan Acar, 2003b). As a matter of fact, there is no systematic and structured counseling skills training program with empirical evidence that is appropriate to the conditions of counselor education in Turkey (Yaka, 2005). Therefore, this study was aimed to describe counseling skills pre-practicum training at guidance and counseling undergraduate programs in Turkey.

Method

Research Model

This research is a descriptive study based upon qualitative data (Creswell, 2003; Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996).

Participants

There were 29 undergraduate guidance and counseling programs in the 2008-2009 academic years (Öğrenci Seçme ve Yerleştirme Sistemi [ÖSYM], 2008). The research group of this study consisted of 11 guidance and counseling undergraduate programs voluntarily participate into study out of 22 programs.

Data Collection Instrument

The Survey Form developed by the researcher based on the opinions of four experts from counseling and curriculum fields was used. It consisted of 10 open-ended questions including the following headings: courses provided pre-practicum counseling skills training; credit and hours of courses; goals and content of courses; text-books; targeted counseling skills; counseling skills training program that is used as a base for training; course process (methods, techniques, strategies, exercises); assessment of counseling skills at the end of courses; role and importance of courses in counselor education.

Procedure

The Survey Form sent to chairs of guidance and counseling program with the cover letter via e-mails. The chairs were being asked to deliver the survey form to the instructor of courses provided counseling skills training and after the form filled by the instructor, send the form to the researcher via e-mail.

Data Analysis

A content analysis was carried out based on the qualitative data. After developing certain themes and assigning codes under these themes, themes were presented to the *expert reviews* (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005). An evaluation meeting was conducted with three experts from counseling and curriculum fields in order to confirm consistency and persuasiveness.

Results

Content analysis results indicated six main themes: (a) course characteristics, (b) course content, (c) course process, (d) assessment of students' success in counseling skills, (e) importance of course, and (f) problems and suggestions.

Course Characteristics

Under this theme, name, semester, credit and goals of courses were examined. The results indicated that counseling skills pre-practicum training is provided through courses with titles such as "Principles and Techniques of Counseling (n=6)", "Principles and Techniques of Individual Counseling (n=1)", "Techniques of Counseling (n=1)", "Individual Counseling Skills (n=1)", "Interpersonal Skills (n=1)", "Theories of Counseling (n=1)", and "Principles and Techniques of Group Counseling (n=1)" at undergraduate programs. In general results showed that counseling skills pre-practicum training was provided through only one course and there were differences among undergraduate programs regarding name, semester and credit of course. However, it can be said that counseling skills pre-practicum training was mostly provided through the course with title of "Principles and Techniques of Counseling" as a 3 credit course in the fall semester of third year. Furthermore, course provided in undergraduate programs (n=8) mostly aimed "both knowledge and skill based goals", while in some undergraduate programs (n=3) aimed "just knowledge based goals".

Course Content

Under this theme, two sub-themes were emerged: (a) basic topics, and (b) targeted counseling skills.

Basic topics were coded under 13 topics. These topics regarding undergraduate programs were counseling process (n=7), counseling skills (n=6), characteristics of effective counselor (n=5), Counseling

relationship (n=4), therapeutic conditions (n=4), counseling process skills (n=4), strategies and interventions of counseling (n=3), helping professions (n=3), theories of counseling (n=2), Ethics and legal issues of counseling (n=2), specific topics in counseling (n=2), group counseling (n=1), and interpersonal relationships, respectively. In general, results indicated that basic topics of stated course were very diverse and there were differences among undergraduate programs. In other words, it can be said that only some undergraduate programs focused on counseling skills while many undergraduate programs focused on counseling theories, strategies and interventions as basic topics.

Under targeted counseling skills, three themes were emerged based on counselor education and counseling skills training literature. These were (a) therapeutic conditions, (b) basic counseling skills, and (c) advanced counseling skills. Results indicated that most of the undergraduate programs (n=8) aimed to teach therapeutic conditions (empathy, genuineness, respect and concreteness). Regarding basic counseling skills, attending (n=4), encouraging (n=3), questioning (n=4), reflection of content (n=7), reflection of feeling (n=7), and summarizing (n=5) skills aimed to teach. It can be said that undergraduate programs mostly aimed to teach reflection of content and reflection of feeling skills among basic counseling skills. Regarding advanced counseling skills, confrontation (n=5), self-disclosure (n=6), immediacy (n=3), interpretation (n=2), feedback (n=3), information (n=2), suggestion (n=2), and directives (n=2). It can be said that undergraduate programs mostly aimed to teach self-disclosure and confrontation.

On the other hand, some undergraduate programs aimed to teach skills that were not analyzed under counseling skills. These skills included counseling process skills, skills regarding counseling strategies and interventions and skills regarding specific topics such as dealing with resistance. In general, it can be stated that these skills are competencies/professional skills that are stated in more advanced skills and targeted within the scope of counselor education.

Course Process

Under this theme, three themes were emerged: (a) counseling skills training program base, (b) specific methods of counseling skills training, and (c) text books.

Regarding counseling skills training program base, results showed that only some undergradu-

ate programs (n=4) use counseling skills training programs as a base to teach counseling skills. These counseling skills training programs were Egan's Skilled Helper Model (SHM) (n= 3), Carkhuff's Human Relations Training (HRT) (n=1), Ivey's Microcounseling/Microtraining (MC) (n=1).

Regarding specific methods of counseling skills training, five sub-themes were emerged as instruction, modeling, practice, self-assessment, and feedback-supervision. Results indicated that undergraduate programs used the following methods respectively: (a) instruction (n=9), (b) modeling (n=6), (c), practice (n=6), (d) self-assessment (n=2), and feedback-supervision (n=5). In general, results showed that most undergraduate programs (n=9) used multi-method (instruction/modeling or instruction/modeling/practice) in the stated course for training, but few undergraduate programs (n=2) used single-method for training as just instruction.

Regarding text books, undergraduate programs stated 30 different text books: 13 (foreign books), 12 (translation books), and five (native books). Text books coded under five themes. Respectively, undergraduate programs used the following text books focused on: (a) counseling skills and counseling skills training programs (n=9), (b) counseling and counseling process (n=7), (c) counseling theories and techniques (n=4), (d), group counseling (n=4), and (e) interpersonal relationships, communication skills and personal development (n=2). Regarding books focused counseling skills and counseling skills training programs, out of seven books, two were foreign, four were translation and one was native books.

Assessment of Students' Success in Counseling Skills

Under this theme, assessment techniques were coded under three sub-themes. Results indicated that undergraduate programs used the following assessment techniques, respectively: (a) paper-pencil tests (written examinations) (n=9), (b) homework (n=2), and (c) active participation (n=3). Paper-pencil tests included the types of questions such as open-ended questions concerning theoretical knowledge about counseling skills (n=3), giving counselor responses by using counseling skills for client' responses (n=4), evaluating the effectiveness of counselor responses regarding counseling skills (n=1), and multiple choice questions (n=1). Homework also included written exercises about coun-

seling skills. Active participation included voluntarily participating role playing, self-assessment and providing feedback to peers.

Importance of Course

Regarding the role and importance of pre-practicum counseling skills training course in the counselor education, five sub-themes were emerged. According to the undergraduate programs, themes were as follows: (a) teaching basic counseling skills (n=8), (b) developing professional identity and self-efficacy (n=4), (c) becoming a base for counselor education (n=3), (d) understanding counseling process (n=2), and (e) becoming a base for practicum training (n=2), respectively. In general, it can be stated that undergraduate programs mostly emphasized teaching basic counseling skills and then developing professional identity and self-efficacy.

Problems and Suggestions

Under this theme, four sub-themes were emerged, respectively: (a) excessive number of students (n=4), (b) limited course hour (n=2), (c) limited course material (n=1), and (d) characteristics of students (n=1). In general, it can be stated that one of the main problem of undergraduate programs regarding pre-practicum counseling skills training course is excessive number of students.

Discussion

The results were discussed in the light of counseling skills training and counselor education literature. It can be stated that the results regarding the differences among undergraduate programs with respect to the course characteristics and course content were very striking and threatening. It can be also argued that there is a lack of common understanding among undergraduate programs regarding how to conduct pre-practicum counseling skills training within the scope of counselor education. Secondly, it can also be stated that there is a lack of common understanding among undergraduate programs regarding the skills that should be taught within the scope of pre-practicum counseling skills training. Therefore, it can be argued that there is also no agreement among counselor educators about what counseling skills are. In conclusion, these results once again remind the importance of standardization and accreditation of counselor education as soon as possible.

Regarding the targeted counseling skills, results indicated that undergraduate programs mostly aimed to teach therapeutic conditions and reflection of content and reflection of feeling among basic counseling skills, and self-disclosure and confrontation among advanced counseling skills in pre-practicum course. Based on these findings, it can be argued that counseling skills training still has been still based on Rogers. Moreover, there has been no improvement in counseling skills training from the beginning of counselor education in Turkey. On the other hand, the results regarding targeted counseling skills showed that undergraduate programs just aimed to teach particular counseling skills. It can also be argued that novice counselors have been educated with limited competencies regarding counseling skills. Therefore, it should be questioned the quality of counselors trained at undergraduate level and the quality of counseling services provided by them urgently (Seligman, 2005; Whiston & Cooker, 2000).

Regarding the course process, the results indicated that many undergraduate programs did not use counseling skills training program as a base to teach skills. It can be said that counseling skills training was not conducted as a structured and systematic manner as literature pointed out. Therefore, it can be argued that counselor educators in Turkey did not give enough importance to the counseling skills training within the scope of counselor education. Regarding the specific methods of counseling skills training, results showed that most undergraduate programs used multi-methods (eg. instruction and practice) while few used single-method for training as just instruction. Therefore, it can be stated that the course provided counseling skills training was conducted as a didactic-experiential course at undergraduate programs. However, when examined detail regarding how these methods were used in the present course, it is difficult to say that the methods were used efficiently with respect to their unique functions and contributions to the skill training as pointed out in literature (Hill & Lent, 2006). Besides, modern technologies were not being used as tools for quality training (Hayes & Robinson, 2000; Hayes et al., 2003). Consequently, it can be argued that usage of specific methods of counseling skills training in Turkey was very drop behind the improvements as pointed out in the literature. On the other hand, it seems that the lack of enough practice for counseling students may result lack of self-efficacy and skill development since personal successes brought about through practice as suggested by Bandura (1997).

Regarding the assessment of students' success in counseling skills, results indicated that undergraduate programs mostly used the paper-pencil tests (written examinations). In the literature, it is highlighted that the paper-pencil tests seem to be most suitable for the efficient assessment of knowledge while performance based tests are more suitable for the efficient assessment of insight and skill (Baker et al., 1993; Smith & Van Der Molen, 1996a, 1996b). To make an adequate assessment, it is recommended the use of performance based tests in combination with paper-pencil tests (Hill & Lent, 2006; Smith & Van Der Molen, 1996a, 1996b). Based on these evidences, it can be stated that the assessment techniques of counseling skills in the course provided counseling skills training were not effective and similarly with specific methods of counseling skills training results, was drop behind the improvements as pointed out in the literature.

In a conclusion, the results indicated that the counseling skills pre-practicum training was not conducted in a qualitative manner within the scope of counselor education in Turkey. Based on this result, it can be argued that counselor educators did not place enough importance to the necessity of structuring qualified counseling skills pre-practicum training in counselor education. Considering the most important work of counselor educators is to teach these skills to the novice counselors, it is suggested that counselor educators in Turkey should criticize themselves regarding how to conduct counseling skills training. Moreover, it is recommended that cooperative and coordinated work among counselor educators through various meetings will help to develop the quality of counseling skills training.

This study was the first study aimed to describe counseling skills pre-practicum training at guidance and counseling undergraduate programs in Turkey. However, it should be considered the limitations of this study regarding research group and data collection methods. It is recommended that within the scope of counselor education in Turkey, counseling skills pre-practicum training and the trainings regarding other targeted skills and competencies should be conducted in a scientific manner to test their effectiveness and also test the other significant variables such as the specific methods of training, trainers and characteristics of counselor trainees with different research approaches and methods. It is believed that further studies should contribute a lot to richer counselor education literature in Turkey.

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