



Opinions of Counselor Candidates Regarding Counseling Skills Training*

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to contribute to the enhancement of the quality of counseling skills training and counselor education through the medium of understanding the opinions of counselor candidates regarding counseling skills training. The research group consisted of 67 counselor candidates who voluntarily participated in the study. The research data was collected by three different qualitative data collection tools developed by the researchers. Content analysis was carried out and the results indicated five main themes: Counseling Skills, Specific Skills Training Methods, Perceptions of Counseling, Being a Counselor Candidate, the Learning and Teaching Process of Counseling Skills. The results also showed that within the scope of systematic counseling skills training programs, using various skill training methods and instructional technologies which are integrated compatibly was effective. At the same time, the results indicated that counseling skills training provided an increase in professional competency and helped to develop the professional identity of counselor candidates. The results are discussed and interpreted in light of the literature. Besides, some suggestions are provided to counselor educators and researchers.

Key Words

Counselor Education, Counselor Candidates, Counseling Skills Training, Microcounseling, Professional Development of Counselor Candidates.

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Counselor/therapist education is aimed at training counselor/therapist candidates as professional counselor/therapists with essential knowledge, skills and professional identity. Becoming a counselor/therapist is also considered to be a developmental process (Hackney & Cormier, 2005). Thus some developmental models have been set since the 1980's (e.g. Hogan, 1964; Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987 as cited in Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1995). Enhancing the quality of supervision, which plays a significant part in the professional development and education of counselor/therapists, is the aim sought to be gained through the understanding of these models (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004; Borders & Brown, 2005, Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003).

The experiences and evolution of counselor/therapist candidates during their training has been investigated within the scope of professional developmental researches (e.g. Hill, Sullivan, Knox, & Schlosser, 2007; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). It is possible to say that most of these researches investigated the development of counselor candidates with regard to the practicum process and community service activities. There has also been an increase in the number of researches which thoroughly investigate the experiences of counselor/therapist candidates and the pre-practicum process. (e.g. Folkes-Skinner, Elliott, & Wheeler, 2010; Hill, Sullivan et al., 2007; Hill et al., 2008; Woodside, Oberman, Cole, & Carruth, 2007). At this point the studies which focus on counseling/helping skills are quite important because the counseling skills training is one of the most important parts in counselor education (e.g. Hill, Sullivan et al., 2007). It is also emphasized that counseling skills training is the most important prerequisite for counseling practicum (Hill & Lent, 2006; Ladany & Inmann, 2008; Whiston & Coker, 2000).

It is noted that many researches on counselor education in Turkey have investigated practicum courses, or the supervision process of courses, such as individual counseling practicum (e.g. Aladağ & Bektaş, 2009; Denizli, Aladağ, Bektaş, Cihangir-Çankaya, & Özeke-Kocabaş, 2009; Zeren & Yılmaz, 2011), group counseling practicum (e.g. Aladağ, Bektaş, Cihangir-Çankaya, Özeke-Kocabaş, & Yaka, 2009; Aladağ, Bektaş, Denizli, Özeke-Kocabaş, & Yaka, 2008) and counseling practicum in schools (e.g. Özyürek, 2009). The results of these researches have provided information about the qualities and needs of counselor candidates, as well as providing insight for enhancing the quality of counseling

practicum and supervision. There has recently been an increase in the research which investigates counseling skills training (e.g. Aladağ & Bektaş, 2007; Bektaş & Aladağ, 2005; Meydan, 2010; Yaka, 2005, 2011). This research is considered to present significant results regarding the effectiveness of counseling skills training, and contribute to the enhancement of skills training through the adaption of a systematic counseling skills training method within Turkish counselor education. However, there isn't any existing research which attempts to understand the opinions of counselor candidates regarding counseling skills training. Therefore, the aim of this study is to contribute to the enhancement of the quality of counseling skills training and counselor education through the medium of understanding the opinions of counselor candidates regarding counseling skills training.

Method

Research Design

In this study explanatory research design, a qualitative design type, was used to gain more substantial and extensive data (Creswell, 2003).

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 67 volunteer counselor candidates who were enrolled in the Counseling Principles and Techniques Course of Ege University's Guidance and Counseling Undergraduate Program for the 2010-2011 academic year. 47 participants were female and 20 were male. Two focus group interviews were also conducted with 18 participants, each group consisting of 9 participants.

Instruments

The research data was collected using three different qualitative instruments developed by the researchers of this study. The *Evaluation Form of Basic Counseling Skills Instruction Process* consists of three sections: (a) Basic counseling skills, (b) instructional methods, and (c) perception of the counseling process, the counseling profession and self-perceptions of being a counselor candidate after the first stage of the course. The *Evaluation Form of Counseling Principles and Techniques Course* consists of two sections. The first section has three sub-sections: (a) Advanced counseling skills,

(b) instructional methods, and (c) perceptions of the counseling process, the counseling profession and self-perceptions of being a counselor candidate after the second stage of course. The second section consisting of five open-ended questions was aimed at retrieving information about the instructor, the roles and responsibilities for themselves as counselor candidates, the role and place of the course among other courses, and any problems or suggestions. Finally, the *Structured Interview Form* consisting of 10 open questions, was aimed at taking the opinions of counselor candidates regarding basic and advanced counseling skills and the learning and instruction process of these skills.

Counseling Skills Training

Counseling skills training is conducted within the Counseling Principles and Techniques Course in Ege University's Guidance and Counseling Undergraduate Program. Counseling skills training consists of two stages. The first stage takes six weeks and the second stage takes four weeks. *Microcounseling/Microtraining (MC)* (Ivey, 1971; Ivey, Packard, & Ivey, 2006) adapted into Turkish by Yaka (2011) and systematically integrated into specific skills training (Ford, 1979) is applied during the first stage. The focus of the first stage focus is basic counseling skills. For the second stage, a didactic approach is mainly used, with a focus on advanced counseling skills.

Data Collection

After completing the first stage of the course, the *Evaluation Form of Basic Counseling Skills Instruction Process* was applied. After the completion of the second stage of the course, the *Evaluation Form of Counseling Principles and Techniques Course* was applied. Finally, two focus group interviews were conducted in accordance with the *Structured Interview Form*.

Data Analysis

Research data was decoded using content analysis. First, all data was pieced together from what was collected by the separate instruments. After that, all data was read by one of the researchers and both prospective codes and draft themes were designated. The coding process was carried out by the inductive method, and codes, themes and patterns were respectively determined. After the coding process, all researchers debated over the codes and themes.

Finally, the designated themes were associated with each other and then interpreted.

Validity and Reliability

Researcher and data triangulation was used to confirm the persuasiveness and consistency of the results. The entire research process and procedures were also clarified to provide transmission and verification of the research. In addition to the instruments, the data, coding drafts and notes were secured by the researchers (Rossman & Rallis, 1998).

Results

Themes and sub-themes (Table 1) were derived as a result of content analysis regarding the views of counselor candidates regarding counseling skills training.

The results regarding *counseling skills* showed that at the beginning of training, counselor candidates had some negative *first impressions* and did *experience some challenges* regarding some counseling skills related to comprehending the function of counseling skills and effective usage. However, they stated they *developed themselves* in the effective use of counseling skills through purposeful training and application of these skills for *usage in daily lives*.

The results regarding *specific skill training methods* showed that counselor candidates found all methods effective and helpful with respect to their unique *functions*: instruction and reading for *comprehending* skills, training films or giving counselor response examples for *modeling*, and practicing with video recording, self-observation, evaluation and feedback for *awareness and development*. On the other hand, they stated that practicing with video recording, self-observation and feedback were the most *effective* methods for learning skills. The results showed that counselor candidates' helping attitudes and perception of the counseling profession changed after skill training. They started to perceive the counseling profession as a challenging, specialized and high-powered job when their statements related to the *perception of the counseling profession* were analyzed.

When the views related to *being a counselor candidate* were analyzed, it was seen that counselor candidates felt *intense anxiety*, *inadequacy* and recognized a *need for development* at first, but with the skills training process they gained *professional recognition* and started to *like the profession*,

Table 1.
Views of Counselor Candidates Regarding Counseling Skills Training

Themes		Sub-themes					
Counseling skills	First impression	Challenge	Awareness/self-development		Usage in daily life		
Specific skill training methods	Function	Comprehension	Effectiveness				
		Modeling					
		Awareness					
		Development					
Perception of counseling profession	Complexity of process	Perception of helping	Professional responsibility		Expertise		
Being a counselor candidate	Anxiety and lack of confidence vs. enjoyment and confidence	Self-criticism	Inadequacy		Need for development	Professional recognition, excitement, and liking profession	Belief
Learning and teaching process of counseling skills	Expectations	Importance and role of skills training	Instructor	Effective instructor	Roles and responsibilities of counselor candidates	Assessment	Problems and suggestions
				Constructive feedback			
				Modeling			

and through this means they developed a *belief* regarding to be an effective counselor.

Regarding the *learning and teaching process of counseling skills*, counselor candidates stated that the instructor is a good model because of their counseling experiences and their constructive manner of giving feedback. Counselor candidates also stated some problems regarding the course's semester: weekly course hours; classroom size, practice and feedback frequency. They gave detailed suggestions for solutions to these issues.

Discussion and Suggestions

It is considered that counselor candidates' negative first impressions and experienced challenges regarding some counseling skills are related to attitudes and styles of helpfulness before the counseling skills training. It is also considered that counselor candidates' experienced challenges are related to how often skills should be used, when they should use these skills, what effect the skills will have on a client, and how they will control their personal reactions. Thus, it is indicated that these challenges are common for the novice counselor/therapist candidates (Hill & O'Brien, 1999; Hill, Sullivan et al., 2007; Ivey & Ivey, 2003). Additionally, it is observed that when counselor candidates want to help someone they listen to them carefully, but talk too much without aim. They ask closed

questions ineffectively, and give advice for solving the problem without comprehending the entire issue as was seen in the following research (e.g. Hill & O'Brien, 1999; Hill, Stahl, & Roffman, 2007; Ivey & Ivey, 2003; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003; Yaka, 2011).

It is considered that advanced counseling skills seemed complicated and frightening to counselor candidates because they are not familiar with advanced counseling skills such as immediacy and confrontation. These skills are also not fitting to the roles with which they have been familiar, such as being a sympathetic friend (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003). At this point, one should notice that this experienced challenge doubtlessly arises from the nature of advanced counseling skills. Thus, counseling skills are defined as a body of competencies classified hierarchically from simple to complex (Cormier & Nurius, 2003; Seligman, 2005; Whiston & Coker, 2000). Considering the counselor candidates' impressions, these challenges exist because advanced counseling skills are not taught with a systematic method such as MC. Thus, this issue is pointed out by almost all counselor candidates.

In the context of the specific skill training methods theme, counselor candidates stated that they found the following specific skill training methods effective and helpful: instruction and reading for comprehending skills, training films or giving

counselor response examples for modeling, and video recording, recalling, evaluating records and getting feedback for awareness. These results are related to basic principles and the learning process of social learning theory and thus consistent with the literature (Bandura, 1997; Daniels, 1994; Ivey, Gluckstern, & Ivey, 1997; Ivey et al., 2006). On the other hand, counselor candidates stated that the most beneficial methods were practice, self-observation, evaluation and feedback while learning counseling skills. These methods are considered helpful with transforming skills into behavior, providing skills development and motivating counselor trainees for practice by enhancing self-efficacy. This result corresponds to the results of researches which investigate the experiences of counselor/therapist candidates broadly and intimately (Folkes-Skinner et al., 2010; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Hill, Sullivan et al., 2007; Woodside et al., 2007). In spite of this, Etringer and Hillerbrand (1995) have pointed out the role of self-evaluation in counselor/therapist education. Essentially, it states that self-evaluation is a meta-cognitive skill which includes the observation, interpretation and evaluation of cognitions, emotions and behaviors of the self (Bennett-Levy, 2006). It is therefore possible to say self-evaluation serves as an influential awareness and self-critiquing experience and thus counselor candidates have an opportunity to learn through their own experiences (Bennett-Levy, 2006; Hill, Stahl et al. 2007).

Counselor candidates stated that their helping attitudes and their perception of the counseling profession changed after the course. They started to perceive the counseling profession as challenging; requiring expertise and a high powered job. These results support the thesis of the developmental models for the counseling profession. For instance, Ronnestad and Skovholt (2003) stated that counselor candidates realize counseling is more complicated than it looks. They also realized their definitions and styles of helping were neither proper nor valid anymore after the first year of counselor education. These results correspond to the results of some researches investigating the counselors' cognitive development (e.g. Duys & Hedstrom, 2000; Fong & Borders, 1997).

When the views related to being a counselor candidate are analyzed, it is seen that counselor candidates at first felt inadequate and recognized a need for development, but with the skills training process, they gained professional recognition and started to like the profession. By this means

they developed a belief that they could become an effective counselor. Also, counselor candidates stated that they experienced intense performance anxiety (excitement, confusion, apprehension and shame) through the skills training process. Some of them stated that their anxiety decreased during the process and turned into appreciation. Others, however, stated they learned to handle their anxiety even if it did not decrease. They stated that becoming a counselor is a serious responsibility, but they already had felt this. These results correspond to researches which point out becoming a counselor is a stressful, emotionally intense process, and involves significant evolution of one's professional identity, self-awareness and self-competency (Folkes-Skinner et al., 2010; Hill, Sullivan et al., 2007; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003; Woodside et al., 2007).

Counselor candidates stated that instructors are a beneficial model because the counseling experiences and the manner of giving feedback were constructive within the context of the *learning and teaching process of counseling skills* theme. These results support both the developmental models and supervisor feedback styles as a part of the qualifications of an effective supervisor, which the literature emphasizes (e.g. Bernard & Goodyear, 2004; Borders & Brown, 1995; Hill, Sullivan et al., 2007; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1993, 2003). On the other hand, counselor candidates stated that they generally focused on mistakes and criticized themselves negatively. This impression of counselor candidates is supported by the observations of other researches as well. Counselor candidates generally focused on inadequacies while watching a video recording of their practice. Therefore, positive feedback given by the instructor is considered crucial for decreasing the anxiety and increasing the competency of counselor candidates.

Also counselor candidates stated that the written examination is not a proper *assessment method* for evaluating counseling skills. Counselor candidates stated that evaluation of their performance in a counseling session would be more pragmatic and proper as a measuring method. This view of counselor candidates corresponds to counselor education literature which emphasize performance based evaluation methods (e.g. video tests, role playing/simulation tests) regarding the assessment of counseling skills competencies (Hill, 2004; Hill & Lent, 2006; Smith & Van Der Molen, 1996a, 1996b). Also, counselor candidates stated

some *problems* regarding the course's semester: weekly course hours; classroom size, practice and feedback frequency, as well as giving detailed *suggestions* related to solutions for these problems. The similarities of problems and suggestions with the results and suggestions of other researches on counseling skills and education in Turkey are considered remarkable and significant. (e.g. Aladağ, 2013; Aladağ & Bektaş, 2007; Meydan, 2010; Yaka, 2011). A "transactional construct" between themes is observed when the results are interpreted as a whole. In other words, professional development properties exist. Counselor candidates' helping attitudes and helping styles effect the skill learning process. On the other hand, the skill learning process restructures a counselor candidates' professional identity by affecting their attitudes and styles.

Consequently, this research is considered to contribute to the literature by investigating the opinions of counselor candidates regarding counseling skills training. Also some suggestions are provided to counselor educators and future researches based on these results: (i) it would be beneficial to integrate several teaching methods and instructional technologies to increase the effectiveness of skills training. Also, developing alternative skill training programs such as MC would be beneficial. (ii) Performance anxiety and the negative self-criticism of counselor candidates are considered to be two of the major issues that counselor educators should deal with. Besides, it would be beneficial anyway to teach constructive evaluation and self-criticism to counselor candidates. (iii) Lastly, conducting research which investigates the professional development of counselor candidates through counseling education is also considered to be beneficial.

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