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Examining the Experiences of Counselor Trainees towards Practices in Individual Counseling Practicum Course

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to examine the experiences of the counseling trainees regarding the first practices they have carried out within the scope of Individual Counseling Practicum course. In the current study, phenomenological method based on qualitative approach was used. The sample group of the research consists of 20 participants who are senior students of the Counseling and Guidance undergraduate program and have completed their counseling practices. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview form and analyzed by inductive thematic analysis method. The experiences of the trainees were classified under 6 categories as a) the problems faced by trainees, b) the resources they use to solve their problems, c) their perceptions and experiences of their client's culture, d) contributions of the practices to them, e) their preferences for clients and f) the use of Culturally Sensitive Counseling course contents in counseling practices. The findings of the present study concluded that while the trainees were anxious due to the problems which they encountered during the practicum; they enjoyed many contributions of experiencing counseling. Based on the findings, some recommendations were made.

1. Introduction

Counseling is a comprehensive aid profession that takes the interaction of the individual with the environment and the sociocultural structure, considering psychopathological dimension and crisis-healing factors (van Hesteren & Ivey, 1990). It is known that unconditional acceptance, empathy, and transparency are among the most basic skills required for this profession. In addition, Cormier and Hackney (2015) mention four counselor competencies becoming prominent in the 21st century: a) prioritizing the wellbeing of the client (virtue), b) developing cultural competence skills concerning client diversity, c) developing information processing and emotion regulation skills, and d) having high resilience in the face of both her/his own problems and the ones of his clients. These competencies seem to be important not only for professional development of counselors, but also for their personal development.

Education is considered as one of the most important steps in professional development of counselors. Counseling and Guidance undergraduate education is the initial and fundamental education pursued to be certified as a counselor in Turkey. In the program, which consists mainly of theoretical courses, the first course in which trainees demonstrate their counseling skills is the "Individual Counseling Practicum" course. In the final year, with the practices made within the scope of this course, trainees are expected to manage the counseling process by combining the theoretical knowledge they acquired in previous years with basic therapeutic skills. A study revealed that 12.8% of the counselors did not practice offering counseling within the scope of Individual Counseling Practicum course and 28.8% of them did not receive supervision (Pamuk

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& Yıldırım, 2016). In addition, most of the counselors stated that they did not receive any counseling/therapy or in-service training after their undergraduate education. This clearly demonstrates the importance of practices in undergraduate education, although being limited, in terms of experiencing counseling and developing therapeutic skills. Meydan's study (2015) concluded that senior trainees practicing counseling and the ones receiving supervision during the practices were better in distinguishing between effective and ineffective content and emotion reflection skills than the ones who did not practice and receive supervision, respectively.

Trainees practicing counseling may become anxious about themselves, their clients, the counseling process and their supervisors (Barbee et al., 2003; Özteke-Kozan, 2018). Cormier and Hackney (2015) classified the common concerns of inexperienced counselors into three categories: a) difficulties in dealing with personal problems, b) all situations causing anxiety in the counseling process, and c) problems in integrating theoretical knowledge into practice. In a qualitative research conducted by Şahin et al. (2019), the trainees who offer counseling reported that although they did not find themselves sufficient about using therapeutic skills, they were trying to improve themselves. Another study concluded that trainees who perceived themselves as sufficient in counseling practices have higher counseling self-efficacy (Bakioğlu & Türküm, 2019). According to Al-Darmaki's study (2004), after the first counseling practicum, trainees' counseling self-efficacy levels increase, and anxiety levels decrease. The trainees receiving regular supervision during the practicum perceive themselves more qualified in terms of counseling skills (Cashwell & Dooley, 2001).

A study examining the research on counselor education between the years 2000 and 2018 concluded that CG undergraduate education was perceived as insufficient due to the reasons such as high number of theoretical lessons, limited counseling practicum and inadequate supervision (Boyacı, 2018). Additionally, the fact that the CG programs includes mostly school-oriented (guidance) courses in Turkey (Ültanır, 2005) may cause the counseling dimension to be limited. As a matter of fact, Tuzgöl-Dost and Keklik (2012) found that the counselors consider themselves inadequate regarding implementing counseling theories into practice, issues related to special education, and working with clinical cases. Counselors can develop therapeutic skills as their education levels (Stein & Lambert, 1995) and practical experiences (Jennings & Skovholt, 1999) increase. Moreover, trainess' professional dispositions (see Korkut-Owen et al., 2014) and reasons for choosing the profession (see Saki, 2018) may affect their professional attitudes and counseling skills. Considering that counselors may be affected by many personal and professional factors, it becomes important to examine the professional development of inexperienced counselors. Therefore, the present study explores the senior CG students' experiences in the counseling process as inexperienced counselors. In this way, it is aimed to obtain in-depth information about the trainees' perceptions of their clients and the counseling process, the problems they encounter in this process, and their experiences of the client's similarities and differences. The results of the present study may contribute to the formulation and editing of the course content for all academicians in the CG undergraduate and graduate programs, especially for the lecturers of the Individual Counseling Practicum course. In addition, this study aims to increase the awareness of counselors about counseling skills and process. Moreover, the results of the current study may provide researchers for new research in the related literature. The research questions are given below: *(i)* How do trainees experience of being a counselor for the first time? *(ii)* How do trainees' personality traits and cultural structures reflect on counseling practices? *(iii)* How or in what way do counseling practices affect trainees?

2. Method

2. 1. Research Model

In the present study, based on the interpretative paradigm, the phenomenological method based on the qualitative approach was utilized. Using this method, it is aimed to gain insight over a phenomenon of which the individuals have awareness but desire to obtain more details through the experiences and perceptions pertaining to that specific phenomenon (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013, p. 78). In this study, the first counseling practices of the counselor trainees were considered as a phenomenon and it was aimed to obtain detailed information about their experiences in these practices.

2. 2. Participants

The sample group consisted of 20 senior CG students studying at Trabzon University and taking the Individual Counseling Practicum Course. Participants (P1, P2, …, P20) were selected using purposive sampling strategy. Purposeful sampling is the process of selecting accessible individuals who can contribute to the research with their experiences related to the researched phenomenon (Creswell, 2017, p. 108). In this context, 20 participants who have completed or are about to complete their practices within the scope of the Individual Counseling Practicum course and willing to participate in the research were included in the study. Half of the participants were female (n = 10), half of them were male (n = 10) and the average age was 21.9 years. Unlike the other 6 participants, 14 of the participants stated that they preferred to this program consciously and willingly.

2. 3. Data Collection

Semi-structured interview form was used as a data collection tool. In the first part of the form, there were questions regarding the demographic information of the participants. In the second part, some questions about trainees' reasons for choosing CG undergraduate program, experiences in counseling practices and client preferences were included. To examine whether the prepared questions were comprehensible and could elicit answers for the research questions, the assistance of two experts were sought. In addition to this, comprehensibility of the questions was tested by interviewing with two students who were not included in the research group (the pilot study). After the participants were informed about privacy and voice recording, the interviews were recorded using a smartphone.

2. 4. Data Analysis

Data obtained from the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed according to thematic analysis method based on the inductive approach. Inductive thematic analysis can be defined as the process of coding the data without relying on preexisted codes, and creating themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis consists of six stages: 1) getting familiar with the research data by repeatedly reading them, b) creating the initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) preparing report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this context, data arising from the experiences of the participants regarding the counseling practices were analyzed, codes were generated, and themes were identified from the codes. The themes and the sub-themes were described by giving quotations from the interviews of the participants sufficiently.

2. 5. Qualification and Ethics in the Current Research

Validity in qualitative research means that the findings of the research are true and reflect what is happening, while reliability means that the findings are consistent with investigations repeated in different conditions by different researchers (Gibbs, 2007, p. 91). To ensure the validity of qualitative research, Creswell (2014) proposes that the findings should be shared with and confirmed by the participants. Accordingly, themes including quotations of each participant were presented to her/him and it was confirmed whether the findings reflect their experiences. Supporting research findings with direct quotations is also one of the strategies that enhance validity in qualitative research (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). To ensure validity, the researchers also received help from an independent investigator at various stages of the study (see Creswell, 2014).

To ensure the reliability, the process from the description the demographic properties of the participants to the end of the analyses was explained in a comprehensible manner. Yıldırım and Şimşek (2013) suggest that it is very important to explain the analysis process in detail to ensure consistency with similar research. Also, as in this study, strategies such as making constant comparisons, taking notes, and reviewing transcripts continuously during coding increase the reliability of the analyses (Gibbs, 2007, p. 98). Another tool to ensure reliability is to confirm the clarity of the questions through pilot interviews.

In qualitative research, some ethical problems may arise at every stage, mostly in the data collection process (Creswell, 2017). In this study, in order to prevent possible ethical problems, participants were given comprehensive information about the purpose of the research, data collection process and the principles of confidentiality. The research was carried out with volunteers. Before the interview, the participants were also informed that the expressions which they used in the interviews would be omitted and not used as data if they

did not want these expressions to be exposed. In this way, it was observed that the participants expressed themselves comfortably.

3. Findings

In this section, the data obtained from the interviews about practicum experiences of the counseling trainees were classified under six categories. These are: a) the problems faced by trainees, b) the resources they use to solve these problems, c) their perceptions and experiences of their client's culture, d) contributions of the practices to them , e) their preferences for clients and f) the use of Culturally Sensitive Counseling course contents in counseling practices.

3. 1. First Category: Problems Faced During Practicum

The problems faced by the trainees in the Individual Counseling Practicum course and counseling practices were classified under three themes and summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Problems that Trainees Faced During Practices

Themes	Sub-themes
Personal Problems	Being affected by client's problems (2)
	Reflecting personal problems to counseling (2)
Problems pertaining to Counseling	Finding clients (4)
	Arranging a time (4)
	Concerns about managing the session (8)
	Inadequate counseling skills (9)
Problems pertaining to Supervision	Lack of communicating with the supervisor (3)
	Negative attitudes of the supervisor (1)
	Audio-recording of the sessions (2)

As shown in Table 1, being affected by the client's problems, and reflecting personal problems to the counseling were the personal problems that the trainees encountered during their practices. The statements of P4 and P2 regarding these problems are as follows:

> *Of course, I had problems that I experienced. Sometimes I had to spare time for them and there were times that I wondered if I could manage the counseling. .... Would I reflect this (problem) to the client, would my client detect it? (P4).*

> *… a client with whom I pre-interviewed had lost his girlfriend and it (the pain) was very fresh, nearly a week. He talked about how he lost her and shared all the details. .... Another of my clients had gotten divorced. She talked about some of the things that her husband said about her, which also impressed me a lot, because there was severe psychological violence. And I had to refer these two ones (without starting to offer counseling) (P2).*

Four sub-themes were generated to describe the problems of the trainees regarding the counseling process: finding clients, arranging a time, concerns about managing the session, and inadequate counseling skills. Some trainees had problems starting with finding clients, which is the first stage of the course. P10 stated about his potential clients that *"There were various reactions such as 'I don't want to talk', 'How competent are you in this field?', 'What is your level?', 'You are also a student like me, how can you help me?"*. Another problem of the trainees related to the counseling process was to arrange a time and comply with that time. The statements of P17 on this matter are as follows: *"My male client came late sometimes, sometimes he wanted to postpone the session."*

About half of the trainees (n = 8) stated that they were worried about whether they could successfully carry out the counseling process. P1 made the following statements regarding himself through the counseling process:

> *For example, there was a state of panic brought by inexperience. Listening to the other person was also a problem. …. I had questions in my mind to ask. I was making a road map on the paper. Apart from that, according to what the client said, there were turnovers. It was a problem for me to go to those turnovers at first. When the client said something, I was having trouble changing the subject. …. There was also pressure on me like something… The person in front of me was waiting for something from me. .... When there was a silence, I had to break that silence. It was difficult… (P1).*

Apart from that, the trainees mentioned about the problems pertaining to demonstrating counseling skills:

> *Except for the things that I studied from the book and recommended by my instructor; situations that were not under my control arose. For example, while applying the "miracle question" technique, I asked my client to give a certain answer, (but) he repeatedly gave vague answers. As a result, I seemed to be exhausted for a short time (P7).*

> *My client's problem was being introverted, but when he came to me, he was very excited about telling things. He was talking vividly like living the things again. I was expecting him to finish his words, which was taking too long (P13).*

> *At the 7th and 8th sessions, he tried to bring problems other than our general topics. I had a hard time here and had to give advice. I didn't know what to do (P15).*

> *Clients sometimes do not do their homework. We (trainees) plan what we will do in the (following) session and have difficulty getting out of the plan because they do not do the homework we give (P16).*

> *The first sessions challenged me because I just met my client. I was tired of while I was looking for the problem and a way to solve it (P18).*

The problems of the trainees pertaining the supervision were lack of communicating with the supervisor, negative attitudes of the supervisor, and audio-recording of the sessions. P12 and P17 stated that they had difficulties since they almost never communicated with their supervisors, while P14 had problems due to the criticism of her supervisor. P14, expressed the effect of the critical language on her with the statements like:

> *Unfortunately, we did not get along with my supervisor. .... We met every week. He/she was constantly asking: 'Why are you doing this, why are you doing that?' (negative, critical statements) …. At least, if I must speak for myself, I couldn't say exactly what I wanted to say. What if he/she would get angry? (P14)*

P17 expressed the shortcomings caused by not being able to adequately communicate with his supervisor as follows:

> *It was one of the biggest problems I had that I received almost no feedback from my supervisor. .... I'm sure I made a lot of mistakes because there was no controlling and I didn't know this job... I may have given harm to my client (P17).*

Another problem during the supervision period was the uneasiness caused by the audio-recordings taken in the sessions both for the trainees and the clients:

> *Voice recording affects them (clients) a lot. It affects us, too, but we can forget about it after 2-3 sessions, but my clients were constantly focusing on the fact that their voices were being recorded, looking at the clock, (asking to me after the sessions that) 'Did I say something wrong, will your teacher be angry with you?' (P11).*

> *Maybe it would be better if there was no audio-recording. Because when I recorded (the session), I felt stressed. The instructor would also listen to this audio-recording and grade us, so I may have had difficulty at this point (P8).*

3. 2. Second Category: Resources Used to Solve the Problems

The resources used by the trainees to solve the problems that they faced during the practices are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Resources Used by the Trainees in Problem Solving

Themes	n
Supervisor	15
Scientific sources such as books and articles	13
Classmates	10
Counseling videos on YouTube	2

Most of the trainees (n = 15) received help from their supervisors to solve their problems during the practices. P1 mentioned the support he received from his supervisor as follows: *"… the advices of my supervisor .... It was very helpful to receive feedback like 'You could do that here; you could be more careful here' about the audio-record (while the supervisor listening to record)"*

Other than supervisor, the second most utilized sources of the trainees (n = 13) were the scientific sources such as books and articles. Moreover, half of the trainees (n = 10) examined their classmates' practices of counseling and/or consulted them about their own practices. Two trainees reported that they watched videos to improve their counseling skills. The statements of P11, who applied to many sources in this process, are as follows:

> *I also gave importance to the thoughts of my friends and sought advice from them: 'What would you do if you were me?' Some others had difficulty staying in focus like me. I read what I can do. I watched videos. When we met at Individual Counseling Practicum (course) meetings, my friends were sharing their opinions there, as well. It was also effective to explain myself (my problems). I told my instructor about these (problems). The feedback I received from him/her was also efficient, (otherwise) I may have had to leave (my client). I didn't want to harm the other person, wanted to do (achieve) (P11).*

3. 3. Third Category: Perceptions and Experiences of the Client Culture

The trainees' perceptions and experiences of their clients' culture consisted of 2 themes and a total of 4 sub-themes and are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Perceptions and Experiences of the Client Culture

Themes	Sub-themes
Cultural Similarities	Empathy (5)
	Trust (2)
Cultural Differences	Maintaining therapeutic relationship (2)
	Adjusting to the client's spoken language (3)

According to Table 3, the trainees stated that they could better understand the clients who have similar cultural background with them and that there was a relationship of trust between them depend on this similarity. The statements of the two trainees regarding these sub-themes are as follows:

> *While I was talking to my female client, (realized that) we both experienced the same situations. Thus, we understood each other better because we come from the same culture (P13).*

> *If you have a client from a different culture, he/she may not want to continue. It is easy to develop therapeutic relationship like this (refers the cultural similarity). We don't have any trust issues. …. You earn trust more easily in the same culture. …. When our accent is similar, I feel comfortable, too. …. For example, similar family structure... Thus, I feel more secure (P9).*

Half of the trainees (n = 10) reported that they had no cultural differences with their clients. Other trainees expressed the differences in religious beliefs or Turkish accent used by the clients. Trainees whose religious beliefs differed from their clients were concerned about the fact that the therapeutic relationship would be deteriorated. P4 mentioned her experiences as follows:

> *…. I think I inevitably indicated my religious belief in my clothing. I had problems with his perception of me. I thought 'Does he look at me with prejudice? Does he see me differently? Doesn't he disclose himself to me?' Of course, the things what he told me were wrong for me, but I came through (P4).*

The trainees quickly adapted to the differences in the Turkish accents of their clients. When P9 would reflect content to his client, he empathizes with his client by using his accent: *"When he said something, I reflected it in his own accent. I didn't find him strange, didn't judge him."*

3. 4. Fourth Category: Contributions of the Practices

Contributions of the practices within the scope of Individual Counseling Practicum course to the trainees consisted of 3 themes and a total of 8 sub-themes and are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Contributions of Practices to Trainees

Themes	Sub-themes
Contributions towards Gaining Experience	Opportunity to experience counseling (12)
	Increased self-reliance in being able to be succeed (8)
Contributions towards Counseling Skills	Putting theory into practice (4)
	Developing therapeutic relationship (2)
	The use of mimics (1)
	Realistic expectations (1)
Personal Contributions	Applying the information to the self (1)
	Loving the profession (1)

According to Table 4, the contribution of the practices towards gaining experience was to provide opportunity to experience counseling and to increase self-reliance in being able to be succeed. Examples of the trainees' statements regarding these gains are in below:

I already had the technical things (information). The method (theory and techniques) of therapy, how the environment should be, rules… But it was the first time to practice them. …. And it was a very educational process for me because I did this with a qualified supervisor (P1).

In fact, this is the first time we've done. When I started these sessions, I was very worried about how it would be like. But as I said (before), I'm going to have the last session today and I'm not worried at all (P14).

Initially, practicing seemed distant to us; by practicing counseling both we see our mistakes and seeing what we can do is creating a good effect, it promotes our self-confidence (P6).

Contribution of counseling practices toward the use of techniques and skills included putting the theory into practice, developing therapeutic relationship, awareness of the use of mimic, and realistic expectations. Some of the statements of the trainees regarding these gains are given below:

No matter how much theory we see, it does not have much effect in practice without experience. As a matter of fact, we learned many things in the period for 3 years in terms of theories but seeing what I could do in practice and what I couldn't do, I could say, was worth those 3 years (P3).

Every person is a different person. I learned to enter the world of that person and do healthy things in that world. I learned how difficult it is to establish intimacy but still very beautiful (P18).

My face was facing the window. Her face was towards to me. I could see my face reflected the glass. At that moment, I focused on my own face while she was telling. …. I was not shedding tears, but my face was stiff. …. I told myself 'Is this my facial expression?' and I really realized the gestures and facial expressions. …. After that I started to pay attention to this. …. I chose a specific facial expression to myself in front of the mirror. I can say that I tried to use gestures and mimicry in that way while she was talking to me in the sessions anymore. We should not have high expectation. I learned this. You start (by saying) "I'll come through, everything will go very well. I will increase the score from 50 to 100 (on the rating scale)", but you notice that the situation is mediocre. …. It is impossible to raise a person who does not have significant background over 100 in a period of 8 weeks (P8).

Finally, the personal contributions of the practices include two sub-themes: applying the information to the self and loving the profession. Statements of P4 who did not choose the profession willingly and of P11 regarding these sub-themes are as follows:

In fact, as I did not enroll to the department very consciously, I always thought during the training. "Am I really where I belong? But in counseling practices, I noticed that I have already liked the department (since before) or loved it later by help of the practices (P4).

Sometimes I can experience the same things that the client report. …. I was telling myself that "You told these (to the client) but how good are you in this subject? What can you do?" …. When I thought about the things I read, and tried to put them into practice somehow, I noticed that I could succeed some things (P11).

3. 5. Fifth Category: Trainee Preferences for Clients

The trainees' preferences for clients according to their current knowledge and competences consisted of 3 themes and a total of 15 sub-themes. Themes and sub-themes are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Trainee Preferences for Clients According to Their Current Knowledge and Competences

Themes	Sub-themes
Desired Clients	Clients with mild problems (13)
	Clients whose field of problems are known by counselor (2)
	Clients having similar problems with counselor (2)
	Clients open to change (1)
	Clients being willing to solve problems (1)
Challenging Clients	Clients not taking responsibility (5)
	Clients with severe problems (4)
	Clients with experiences negatively affecting counselor (4)
	Clients having similar problems with counselor (3)
	Resisting clients (2)
	Conservative (1)
	Clients with a higher age difference with counselor (1)
Clients to whom trainees were prejudiced	Clients harming to or having a potential to harm people (8)
	LGBTIQA+ individuals (4)
	Clients with different religious (1)

According to Table 5, types of clients that the trainees show willingness to offer counseling were those a) with mild problems, b) whose field of problems are known by counselor, c) having similar problems with counselor, d) open to change and e) being willing to solve problems. Examples of trainees' statements about the desired clients are as follows:

… for conducting a good, healthy process in initial stages, simpler problems would be better for me (P3)

I can be more qualified and work more productive with issues of which I have awareness (P18).

I think I can work effectively with the troubles that I observed in myself. For example, focusing attention, sleep, (talking) in front of the crowd (P17).

I can work easily with people who want to change, are really disturbed by their problem, and assert their will to change it (P6).

I want him/her to have a certain degree of self-awareness; for example, to see the problem as a problem and want to take a step… (or) rather, I expect him/her to say that he/she really wants that (P5).

Types of clients that the trainees may have difficulty in offering counseling were those a) not taking responsibility, b) with severe problems, c) with experiences negatively affecting counselor, d) having similar problems with counselor, e) resisting, f) conservative, g) with a higher age difference with counselor. While clients having a similar problem with counselor were considered as an advantage by a trainee, some trainees considered it more a disadvantage. Examples of the trainees' views on types of clients they may have difficulty with are as follows:

In fact, clients who do not take responsibility are those constantly running away. …. You come to get help but expect everything from others. …. He/she must take responsibility so that I can build something on it (P8).

If I had a chance to choose, I would not choose clients suffering dramatic traumas because I don't think I could reach them enough. …. So, I think it can be difficult to understand them, to become aware of their feelings (P15).

I am an emotional person, too… I may approach them emotionally. …. I don't know how to direct myself on this subject. For example, if someone who are raped cries in front of me, I cry with her (P12).

When the person in front of me tells something that I also experienced... I cannot help him/her correctly for that moment. I may focus more on myself because I've had the same things. Maybe I can talk about myself (P11).

If the client is very resistant, I will have difficulty … (while) helping him/her to disclose himself/herself. I don't consider myself sufficient in this regard (P13).

A person, for example, is closed minded in point of religious beliefs, have restrictions with going to school, talking to the other people. I guess I couldn't proceed with that kind of clients. Or, a client that especially wants a counselor

of the same sex… When the counselor is the opposite sex, he/she shows resistance. I couldn't do with him/her (P16).

If I have an opportunity ... I would like my client to be the same age. .... I and a 40-50 year old or a mature person may approach an event differently. But I and a person of my age group may look through the same window. Except for problematic issues… (P1).

Types of clients to whom counselors might be prejudiced were those a) harming to or having a potential to harm people, b) being LGBTIQA+ and c) with different religious. Some of the trainee views on these situations are given below:

Of course, this is ultimately psychological aid, but I don't think that I will be understanding to a person who killed a woman, a girl. …. When a terrorist, a traitor, who killed my soldier or police, sits in front of me, different events might come to my mind. I feel bad at that moment (in the situations he mentioned) (P7).

Probably in terms of some (sexual, religious) choices (I may have difficulty) … Not about accepting them (such clients), sure… I just don't think I can help them significantly. Sometimes it is difficult to break prejudices. I probably accept them, but I don't know how far I can get through it within my mind (P15).

Both culturally and socially, since we are not directed like this, it can be difficult for me to work with people whose sexual orientation is different (P10).

3. 6. Sixth Category: Use of Culturally Sensitive Counseling (CSC) Course Content in Practices

Half of the trainees (n = 10) stated that they did not benefit from the information they acquired in CSC course since they did not encounter with clients having different cultures. The statements of P7 in this regard are as follows:

My clients were not the clients having very opposite of and different culture from mine. For example, while instructing this course, our teacher was asking: "Would you offer counseling to an Atheist person? Or to a lesbian?" He would ask such crucial questions. …. Since my clients are not very different from my culture, I cannot say that I applied culturally sensitive counseling here (P7).

The other half of the trainees stated that they used the information they acquired in CSC course. The statements of some trainees are given below:

First of all, last year, our teacher emphasized that we should not put the other person in certain stereotypes when we commence (counseling). When a client sits in front of us… Without approaching his/her gender, language, religion, race, dressing style with prejudice… Just because he/she is his/her own self… (He taught that) we need to feel and know that the client needs help, and to help him/her at that point. There were times we encountered certain things that were not in line with our thoughts, beliefs, or perspective of life, but we did not reflect them to the client thanks to the content we received in this course (P10).

In this course, we received training on gaining flexibility towards different ideas. It was useful in the context of empathy and/or how to behave if the clients react to my ideas (P12).

…. The problems of my two clients, both the female and the male, were similar but both were completely different characters. …. My male client was a more closed person than my female client. I tried to see both objectively and to approach them with the same attitude. .... After all, different cultures, different people, different experiences, different personalities, that is what we learned most in this course (P15).

4. Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings obtained from this research, examining the experiences of the counselor trainees for the first counseling practices within the scope of Individual Counseling Practicum course, were gathered under six categories. Regarding the problems faced during the practicum, three themes were formulated: "personal problems", "problems pertaining to counseling" and "problems pertaining to supervision". Being affected by client's problem and reflecting personal problems to counseling were personal problems of the trainees. Finding clients, arranging a time, concerns about managing the session and inadequate counseling skills were the problems that the trainees encountered in counseling process. The problems of the trainees regarding the supervision are lack of communicating with the supervisor, negative attitudes of the supervisor and audio-

recording of the sessions. These results seem to be consistent with previous research (Büyükgöze-Kavas, 2011; Hill et al., 2007; Meydan, 2019; Meydan & Denizli, 2015; Özteke-Kozan, 2018). The results are also in line with the second phase of Rønnestad and Skovholt's (2003) therapist/counselor development model: beginning student phase. This phase was defined as a period in which trainees making their first practices are excited as well as intense anxiety. Rønnestad and Skovholt suggest that trainees may be affected by many factors, from personal problems to counseling skills, from their peers to supervisors in this phase.

Trainees received the most help from their supervisors to solve problems they encountered in counseling practices. This was followed by scientific sources, classmates of the trainees and counseling videos on YouTube, respectively. In a study conducted by Orlinksky et al. (2001) with approximately five thousand counselors, the counselors considered formal supervision as one of the most important factors in their career development. Besides, they reported that personal experiences, consultation with colleagues, receiving therapy trainings and reading sources about the cases were also effective. Hence, it might be thought that the trainees use similar resources with counselors to solve their problems and to improve themselves during the course.

Half of the trainees indicated that they did not encounter with clients with different cultural background. Therefore, they did not utilize the information that they learned in CSC course in their practices, while the other half stated that they benefited. Trainees having similar cultural background to their clients think that they can understand their clients better and that their clients trust them more. On the other hand, different aspects of the trainees from their clients were religious beliefs and the Turkish accent they used. Trainees with religious differences with their clients were worried about that these differences would harm the therapeutic relationship. In terms of differences in colloquial language, trainees tried to adjust themselves to their clients. A possible explanation for these results might be that the trainees try to not harm to the therapeutic relationship due to the differences and to empathize with their clients. As a matter of fact, a study conducted on counselor trainees revealed that cognitive and affective empathy and openness to experience (one of the personality dimensions) are significant predictors of cultural sensitivity (Aydın & Şahin, 2017).

Contributions of the counseling practices to the trainees were classified under three themes. Their contributions towards gaining experience were opportunity to experience counseling and increased self-reliance in being able to be succeed. Secondly, their contributions towards counseling skills were putting theory into practice, developing therapeutic relationship, the use of mimics and realistic expectations. Finally, personal contributions of the practices were applying the information to the self and loving the profession. These results support previous research regarding the gains of counselor trainees in the first practices (Hill et al., 2007; Howard et al., 2006; Schwing et al., 2011). A study examining the opinions of trainees' first clients demonstrated that trainees were able to develop therapeutic relationship and to use basic therapeutic skills (Kurtyılmaz et al., 2019). Therefore, it might be said that the trainees have learned to manage the counseling process at the basic level, even if they encounter various problems that caused anxiety during the period.

In this study, trainees reported that when they consider their existing knowledge and competencies at the end of the practicum, they would prefer clients- with mild problems, whose field of problems are known by counselor, having similar problems with counselor, open to change or being willing to solve problems. On the other side, they thought they might have difficulty while working with clients- not taking responsibility, with severe problems (abusing/abused, with antisocial personality disorder, etc.), with experiences negatively affecting the counselor, having similar problems with counselor, showing resistance, conservative or with a higher age difference with counselor. These results are in line with the third phase of Rønnestad and Skovholt's (2003) therapist/counselor development model: advanced student phase. In this phase, counselors, who started to practice professionally, are significantly lack of information, avoid making mistakes and thus take no risks; also, they need supervision and consultation. In this respect, it might be said that the trainees want to choose types of clients that they can work more easily and encounter fewer obstacles in the first years after graduation because they are inexperienced.

Having a similar problem with the client was perceived as an advantage for some trainees in terms of understanding and helping the client better. However, some trainees were hesitant about how to help their clients for the problems that they cannot solve in their own lives. Some others were worried about being negatively affected by the clients' experiences because of evoking their own problems. Hill et al. (2007) found

that inexperienced counselors, who identified with their clients or had similar feelings, experienced problems in carrying out the counseling process. There were some trainees stating that they would not prefer to offer counseling the clients a) being LGBTIQA+, b) with different religious beliefs, or c) inflicting or having a potential to harm to people (abusive, antisocial) as they may feel prejudiced towards them. Research indicate that various methods and trainings increase the cultural sensitivity of CG undergraduate students (Aydın, 2014; Cates et al., 2007; Kağnıcı, 2011) and generate increased awareness and knowledge to LGBTIQA+ individuals (Kağnıcı, 2015; Toplu-Demirtaş & Akçabozan-Kayabol, 2018). On the other hand, considering that trainees cannot control their negative feelings, especially against individuals who have committed severe offenses such as sexual abuse; as a requirement of professional counseling (Prikhidko & Swank, 2018), emotion regulation skills become prominent.

The present study has demonstrated that trainees had some negative experiences during the semester within the scope of Individual Counseling Practicum course, but they took responsibility for their clients and prioritized their well-being. Considering their inexperience, the trainees think working with clients having mild problems after graduation. It is concluded that the trainees are aware of their current situation and have realistic expectations. However, the fact that they do not want to work with clients being resilient and lacking responsibility shows that they have low awareness of the fact that they should be able to cope with such clients due to the nature of counseling profession.

The findings of the present study indicate that supervisor support seems the most crucial factor in Individual Counseling course both for development of trainees and for protecting clients from possible harm. However, there are some problems about providing supervision in Turkey. The high number of students and the low number of faculty members are among the factors keeping supervision inadequate. It is considered that arrangements for this course are important for the professional development of the trainees. In addition, it is recommended that faculty members raise awareness of and motivate trainees to improve themselves by receiving specific therapy trainings after graduation. Finally, it is thought that new research on counseling practices and supervision will provide ideas for improving existing practices and developing an accredited counseling practicum course.

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