Increasing Counselor Self-Awareness: The Role of Cognitive Complexity and Metacognition in Counselor Training Programs

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Abstract

The counseling profession is quite unique. It is a profession that requires practitioners to employ interventions beyond learned knowledge or acquired skills. Counselors are also required to incorporate self into their counseling practice, a task not easily accomplished. Counselor educators have the difficult role of training individuals to become competent in the profession of counseling. In fact, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2009) states competent professionals are individuals who have mastered the knowledge and the skills to practice effectively *and* who have developed a professional identity. The purpose of this article is to review literature evaluating the development of cognitive complexity and metacognition as a way to increase self-awareness, and ultimately competency, with counselors in training.

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A developed professional identity implies that an individual is able to practice with integrity, within specified ethical guidelines, and with a comprehensive understanding of clients and presenting problems. These elements of professional competence require counselors to be self-aware. Put simply, a self-aware counselor is one who practices professionally and competently; this counselor "demonstrates the ability to recognize his or her own limitations and to seek supervision or refer clients when appropriate"(CACREP, 2009, p. 32). CACREP (2009) makes clear that competent, professional counselors are self-aware. Furthermore, many proposed models of counselor development hold that increasing self-awareness is a necessary task in becoming a master counselor (Hogan, 1964; Stoltenberg, 1981; Borders, 1990). As students are expected to monitor their own limitations and decide how to apply appropriate counseling interventions in specific situations, counselor educators are expected to identify and to help cultivate self-awareness in their students.

Hansen (2009) defined four conditions for establishing the construct of self-awareness. These are: (a) the self must exist, (b) the self must be available for introspection, (c) the self must have an enduring essence, and (d) the self must be able to be represented by language. These existential conditions presuppose that certain higher-order capacities exist within a person that allow an individual to self-monitor thoughts and actions. Two of these capacities will be discussed in this article: metacognition and cognitive complexity. An understanding of these processes will assist counselor educators in developing student self-awareness.

Metacognition

Metacognition is the process by which a person thinks about thinking (Gredler, 2009). Research indicates that higher levels of metacognition lead to a greater ability to problem-solve (Gredler, 2009; Holder, Whetstone, & Sheinker, 2008; Swanson, 1990) and an increased capacity for developing goals (Gredler, 2009; Holder et al., 2008). Two components of metacognition are usually identified as important: a knowledge about and an awareness of one's thinking and knowledge of when and where to use metacognitive strategies (Gredler, 2009). It is important for counselors to be aware of their metacognitions and, perhaps more importantly, to know how to appropriately utilize that metacognitive information in the form of appropriate counseling interventions.

Prior knowledge of a circumstance or an experience assists with determining how to address novel situations (Gredler, 2009). Many counseling students state discomfort and anxiety regarding the actual practice of working with clients (Jordan & Kelly, 2004). However, "when faced with life situations that cannot be solved by prior knowledge or automatic responses, a thinking person activates metacognitive behavior" (Holder et al., 2008). Counseling situations can be complex, problematic, and puzzling (Schön, 1982). Counselors need to harness metacognitive processes to frame clients' idiosyncrancies. Counseling students should recognize their metacognitions as valuable sources of information. For example, metacognitive strategies can be appropriately utilized in counseling sessions through here-and-now processing (Yalom, 1980; Schneider; 2008) and recognition of countertransference (McWilliams, 1994).

Holder et al. (2008) stated that teaching a person a set of skills is of little value unless that individual knows how to appropriately apply the skills. A person with well-developed metacognitive skills demonstrates the ability to self-monitor and to self-direct behavior (Holder et al., 2008). Furthermore, these authors found that metacognitive strategies increase the ability to generalize skills across situations and that metacognition can enhance goal setting. Goal setting behavior helps counselors direct their clients' attention, provide motivation, and encourage different ways of relating to the world (Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981). This is particularly relevant for the supervision process. If students have learned skills without metacognitive strategies, then those students will have difficulty conceptualizing various presenting client concerns. It is impossible to prepare future counselors regarding every possible problem with which clients may present (Schön, 1982). Therefore, it is imperative for counselor educators to help students refine metacognitive skills. Swanson (1990) found that students with stronger metacognitive skills performed better in exhibiting problem solving skills regardless of overall level of aptitude. In this study, even individuals with low overall aptitude/high metacognition outperformed individuals with higher levels of aptitude. It seems that an ability to self-monitor one's behavior can assist students in appropriately utilizing under-developed skills. Counseling students must develop the skills to apply appropriate, comprehensive, effective strategies with their clients (CACREP, 2009).

Holder et al. (2009) recommended students utilize self-directed strategies for increasing metacognition. Student-led strategies include self-questioning to promote metacognition. These authors recommend that students learn to direct, monitor, evaluate, and correct what they know about any given situation. In essence, metacognition allows counselors to reflect on counseling interventions while they are being implemented and to evaluate on the efficacy of the interventions after they were implemented (Schön, 1982). Counselors should be able to answer the question "Do I know how to fix the strategy if it is not working?"

Counselors need to understand that the counseling process requires patience and flexibility regarding the information that they are receiving, both verbally and nonverbally, from their client. Counselors should integrate any new information received with what they have already learned from their clients. Supervisors can assist in the development of the students' metacognitive skills by asking probing questions that enhance the students' self-evaluating. Additionally, supervisors should monitor the students' level of confidence with their metacognition. How well do the students trust what they are telling themselves?

Cognitive Complexity

Closely related to metacognition is the concept of cognitive complexity. In the last twenty years, cognitive complexity has been identified as an important component of counselor training (Choate & Granello, 2006). Cognitive complexity is one's ability to assimilate, integrate, and use a variety of perspectives and a broad amount of information in developing understanding of a topic (Granello, 2010). Cognitively complex counselors utilize comprehensive client conceptualization (Borders, 1989), remain open-minded, are more flexible, practice empathetic communication, exhibit multicultural social desirability (Wendler & Nilsson, 2009), maintain a process-oriented approach regarding the counseling relationship, self-monitor, and are self-aware (Granello, 2010).

Cognitive complexity theories suggest that counselors utilize training and experiences to create conceptual templates to describe what they observe (Welfare & Borders, 2010). A cognitively complex counselor recognizes a variety of pertinent characteristics about the client. Clinical cases that are vague and contradictory can be understood and conceptualized by cognitively complex counselors (Granello, 2010; Welfare & Borders, 2010). Moreover, counselors with low levels of cognitive complexity view clients more superficially. While counselors with low levels of cognitive complexity tend to use more dichotomous, simplistic features when making impressions about the client, cognitively complex counselors work from a more comprehensive understanding of the client and are thus more effective in their clinical work (Welfare & Borders, 2010).

Granello (2001) encouraged educators to utilize Bloom's Taxonomy as an educational and assessment tool in determining an individual's level of cognitive complexity. Granello (2001) utilized Bloom's six stages—Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation—to develop graduate student writing abilities. Determining which stage a student falls within based upon the quality of an integrative literature review, Granello (2001) was able to make necessary educational interventions to assist the student toward a higher stage of cognitive processing. The same processes apply in a counseling session; the integration of language is no longer from words on paper but through interactions with a human being. The student's ability to operate at Bloom's higher levels of cognitive processes will lead to a more thorough understanding of the client and a comprehensive treatment approach.

Many students' levels of cognitive complexity will increase naturally after they have completed the internship sequence of their counseling training programs (Brendel, Kolbert, & Foster, 2002). Brendel et al. (2002) found that forming counseling skills and incorporating empathetic communication facilitates the development of cognitive complexity organically. Furthermore, other studies (Granello, 2010; Welfare & Borders, 2010) have shown that cognitive complexity continues to develop well after one's graduation. These studies indicate that, compared with other factors, counseling experience contains the most power in predicting an individual's level of cognitive complexity

(Granello, 2010; Welfare & Borders, 2010). It seems that deliberately assisting counseling students to develop these skills to increase self-awareness will inadvertently add years of "experience" to their counseling abilities.

Granello (2010) compared years of counseling experience with William Perry's epistemological model (Perry, 1970). Perry's (1970) model groups individuals' perceptions about the world of knowledge into categories. These categories, used by Granello (2010) to measure counselors' levels of cognitive complexity, include: (a) dualistic, (b) multiplistic, (c) relativistic, and (d) committed relativistic. The dualistic thinking category is related to low levels of cognitive complexity. This category is characterized by simplistic, dichotomous thinking structures (Granello, 2010). The multiplistic thinking category moves from an either-or structure of understanding towards attributes of uncertainty; whereas a counselor in the dualistic category holds to unquestioned, absolute truths (Perry, 1970), the multiplistic counselor becomes overwhelmed by data and abandons the search for right answers (Granello, 2010). The next category is relativistic thinking, which features contextual knowledge where decisions are made utilizing the best information. These counselors "have the ability to engage in metacognition, which allows them to have a critical inner voice to engage in reasoned self-reflection" (Granello, 2010, p. 93). This highlights the relationships between metacognition and cognitive complexity as potentially being two sides of the same coin. Granello (2010) discussed the last stage, committed relativistic thinking, as being merely theoretical in nature as very few individuals move past the relativistic stage. In Granello's (2010) study counselors hit two critical developmental shifts regarding counselor complexity. The first occurs at approximately 5 to 10 years of experience. It should be noted that Granello (2010) started counting years of experience with the internship year; thus, the shift for some would occur shortly after obtaining full licensure. Additionally, Granello (2010) considered practicing in the profession in any capacity (practice, supervision, counselor educator, or administrator) as counseling experience. At 5 to 10 years of experience, counselors were more likely to be at an early multiplistic stage of development (Granello, 2010). The next shift occurred with 10 or more years of experience. At this point counselors were more likely to be at a late multiplistic stage or an early relativistic stage of development (Granello, 2010). The research indicates that the counseling profession is a lifelong journey that starts at the beginning of the counselor's graduate training program and continues throughout his or her career (Brendel, Kolbert, & Foster, 2002; Granello, 2010).

Cognitive complexity will develop during and after graduate training (Fong, Borders, Ethington, & Pitts, 1997; Granello, 2002; Granello, 2010). However, if graduates of counseling programs are expected to holistically conceptualize (CACREP, 2009) and to understand multiple, complex, and even paradoxical aspects of the clients, then it is critical that counselor educators do not simply allow cognitive complexity to develop naturally over time. Counselor educators must intentionally be aware of these conceptualization skills. Additionally, the American Counseling Association Code of Ethics (2005) makes it clear that the "primary responsibility of counselors is to respect the dignity and to *promote the welfare of clients*" (p. A.1.a, emphasis added). Again, to fully promote an individual's welfare counselors must be able to conceptualize that person's idiosyncratic way of interacting in the world.

There is little research that discusses specific intervention techniques that will increase cognitive complexity. One of the only strategies that appear frequently in the literature is known as Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR; Kagan, 1976, 1980). IPR was developed by

Norman Kagan as an intervention to use during supervision (Cashwell, 1994). This process is designed to help supervisees' become more aware of the dynamics of the counselor/client relationship, move towards a greater understanding of the client, and develop an increased awareness of the supervisees' own limitations inhibiting greater understanding of the client (Borders & Brown, 2005; Cashwell, 1994). Through this process supervisors can help facilitate cognitive complexity development by utilizing out-loud thinking (Borders, 1989; Borders & Brown, 2005). This strategy requires supervisors to review the supervisees' counseling tapes prior to the session (Cashwell, 1994) or listen to the tapes during session (Borders, 1989). Supervisees are encouraged to utilize out-loud discussions regarding portions of the tape that are deemed important. The supervisees should speak about their thoughts and feelings that were occurring *during that time* of the counseling session (Cashwell, 1994). Supervisors help the supervisees focus on the relational dynamics allowing for the supervisees to reach their own resolution (Cashwell, 1994). This strategy will help the supervisees make explicit the implicit thus moving towards greater cognitive complexity.

Some authors have attempted to formulate specific training models to enhance the development of cognitive complexity within a graduate counseling program (Little, Packman, Smaby, & Maddux, 2005). The Skilled Counselor Training Model (SCTM; Smaby, Maddux, Torres-Rivera, & Zimmik, 1999) is a stage model that systematically teaches mastery of counseling skills while promoting accurate self-assessment of those skills (Little et al., 2005). This model seems to be progressive with each stage building upon the other. The first stage of SCTM (Smaby et al., 1999) is the exploring stage where the trainee works with simulated clients to learn, perform, and monitor skills. The counseling student then begins to conceptualize affective and behavioral blocks that inhibit problem solving in the understanding stage. It is also during this stage that the student is encouraged to understand the importance and the impact of the counseling relationship. During the acting stage, the trainee begins to place more of an emphasis on implementing plans of action based upon information gathered in earlier stages and based upon personal impressions of the student. Thus, it seems that students are encouraged to develop counseling skills alongside the development of metacognition, which leads to an increase in cognitive complexity. In fact, Little et al. (2005) compared two counseling theory courses in which one received SCTM training. The results of the study indicated that the SCTM students scored higher on the RCQ, a two-question measure of cognitive complexity. Though the authors noted the control group was one half the size of the experimental group and the RCQ is not very reliable to cognitive complexity changes over a brief time, it seems that a structured approach that places a focus on helping students become comfortable with metacognitive self-assessment can lead to higher levels of cognitive complexity.

Unfortunately, students are at various stages of their cognitive development, which can make the process of refining cognitive complexity difficult (Choate & Granello, 2006). Though creating a training model that is intended to work for all students seems like a good idea, in practice it can be very difficult, especially with the field of counseling. Choate & Granello (2006) identified the faculty adviser as having the potential to be a critical component of the student's development of cognitive complexity.

> "The faculty adviser is the one consistent person during a student's enrollment who can monitor that student's development across the program; who can tailor advising methods to match the developmental needs of an advisee; and who can interact with

> other program faculty…to ensure the optimal learning environment for that student" (Choate & Granello, 2006, p. 117).

Advisers who move away from prescriptive approaches and toward developmental approaches to supervision can encourage self-reflection and self-awareness in the student (Choate & Granello, 2006). Choate and Granello (2006) proposed a developmental model for advising across the counseling program that provides a framework for advisors to intervene beyond merely developing a plan of study to engaging with the student in a developmentally appropriate way that helps create confidence, cognitive development, and self-awareness. Thus, research indicates that institutions should be mindful of the need to develop counseling programs that promote and develop cognitive complexity on the broad level and on the individual level. Counselor educators need to be aware of importance of encouraging cognitive development during classes, advisory meetings, and supervision sessions.

Counselors with high levels of cognitive complexity and a greater tendency toward metacognitive skills are more likely to consider comprehensive conceptualizations of that client and intervene appropriately (Gredler, 2009; Holder et al., 2008). One strategy that supervisors and educators can continue to utilize that seems to integrate the use of metacognition and cognitive complexity is treatment planning. Implementing treatment plans is an integral part of the students' training and the clinical process (Mears, 2009). Understanding the cognitive processes that are occurring within the supervisee as it relates to treatment planning can lead to its utilization as a developmental tool for the supervisee.

Supervisees need to conceptualize clients in ways that are clear and succinct. Metacognition and cognitive complexity influence client conceptualization and goal direction. Well-developed treatment plans require counselors to utilize complex conceptualizations and to then be aware of the metacognitions that flow from those conceptualizations. It then seems that that practice of treatment planning leads to an increased ability to utilize metacognitive and cognitive complex processes. Further, treatment plans require counselors to develop the interventions that will act as means to the treatment goal. Supervisors can utilize some of the concepts of IPR to pull out the supervisees' cognitions. Students need to be able to understand how they are arriving at their plans for treatment (cognitive complexity) and then be able to evaluate these decisions (metacognition). This increase of self-awareness seemingly would create more confidence and a greater ability to self-evaluate.

Discussion

CACREP (2009) expects counseling training programs to produce graduates who can exhibit a wide range of skills and have a broad base of knowledge. Counselors who meet the standards set forth by CACREP (2009) are required to consider a myriad of matters when working with clients, such as: (a) ethical and legal issues, (b) diagnostic impressions and criteria, (c) the client's ecology, (d) public mental health policy, (e) effective treatment approaches, (f) need for referral, (g) possible suicidality, (h) multicultural influences, (i) assessment skills, (j) interpersonal techniques, (k) record-keeping standards, (l) community resources, (m) awareness of own feelings, (n) biases and judgments, (o) self-care, and (p) the relationships between the counselor and the client. Counselors may be skilled in each of these areas; however, it is important for the counselors to be aware of their reasoning for choosing a particular intervention with any client (Holder, Whetstone, & Sheinker, 1998).

Counselor educators have an ethical and professional responsibility to encourage these skills in their students. More research is needed in this area to further define the constructs of metacognition and cognitive complexity. Much of the research on cognitive complexity and metacognition addressed from a developmental perspective; research is needed to elaborate on effective strategies that will harness the development of these skills during and after a counseling training program. Counselor educators and counseling training programs should be intentional in assessing and increasing cognitive development of students in their counseling training programs. This will lead to the development of counselors who are self-aware, self-monitoring, competent, comprehensive, and professional in their future practice.

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