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The Need for a Constructivist Approach in Supervising Second Career Counseling Students: The Intersection of Life Experience and Counselor Development

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Stephen Burton

Burton, Stephen, is a Doctoral Candidate in the Ph.D. program in Counseling at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He is a North Carolina Licensed Professional Counselor and a licensed North Carolina school counselor. Before beginning a master’s degree in school counseling and subsequent entry into a Ph.D. program, he worked in the information technology field for 17 years.

Introduction

Embarking on the journey of a second career counselor is a time of purposeful transition, discovery, and reorientation for increasing numbers of older students entering into university graduate counseling programs. While traditionally, most students have been found to enter graduate school programs by their 30th birthday, current trends in enrollment demographics show that from 1995 to 2005, university graduate student enrollment for students 40 years and older has increased 27% (Redd, 2007). Education based graduate programs are the most common discipline of study for non-traditional older graduate students with a trend of continued projected increasing enrollment according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2009). Closely tied to this trend are the reasons that inform and motivate adults to embark on a journey into new careers in the counseling field including life-span generativity factors, a long-held interest in the subject, personal development, career development, and a desire to fulfill latent ambitions (Bamber & Tett, 2000; Blaxter, Dodd, & Tight, 1996; Lacefield & Mahan, 1988; O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007; Patterson, 2008). While the trend of increasing numbers of second career counseling students is acknowledged in current counseling literature, very little research has been undertaken thus far that examines the phenomenon of second career counselors from the perspective of meeting the unique educational and supervision needs of these students in order to leverage and extend the benefits they bring to university counseling programs, as well as understand and address possible associated risk factors.

As a part of this shift in enrollment demographics, second career counseling students are generally thought to be an enhancement to university graduate counseling
programs (Patterson, 2008). However, the trend of growth in enrollment of adult learners also presents a number of challenges that counselor educators face including certain dilemmas in accommodating second career counseling needs in the context of deficits inherent in the major supervision models and their disconnection to life-span development theory (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004), as well as deficits in current counselor education pedagogical practices (Houser, 2006; Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998). This paper will describe characteristics of older second career students in relation to risk and protective factors associated with becoming professional counselors, address current constructivist models and approaches in the literature that deal with counselor education and supervision, and finally, offer a constructivist view of training second career counselors and supervisors that goes beyond current approaches by the addition of certain components thought to address the unique needs and challenges of this group of students. An exploration into the implications of future research that might serve to improve the efficacy of counselor educators and supervisors through systemic changes in counselor education programs is undertaken. Because of the very limited research on the topic of second career counselors, literature is also reviewed that focuses on the general topic of educating older non-traditional students with links made to the constructs of this paper when relevant to the subject of second career counselors.

The Ontology of Second Career Counseling Students

Beyond the reasons which inform and motivate second career counselors to enter into the therapeutic helping field are specific and unique traits which are shared with non-traditional and second career students across multiple learning disciplines and domains (Blaxter et al., 1996). Together, these traits form the basis of certain unmet educational needs and desires that must be understood and addressed within counseling programs to support second career counselors in transcending their prior work experiences (Bamber & Tett, 2000). The function of understanding, addressing, and remediating these needs and desires through the lens of current supervision models and approaches as well as suggested constructivist program adjustments may be more easily accomplished when divided into the following categories that are associated with teaching and learning practices relative to the counselor education and supervision field (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007; Wenger, 1998).

Meaning as a Part of Academic Learning and Practice of Second Career Counselors

In an article by Patterson (2008), recently graduated master’s-level second career counselors were asked to describe what motivated them to leave careers in which they were already established to enter into the field of counseling. The response of one counseling program graduate in Patterson’s article exemplified much of what is embodied in all of the article interviews and forms the generative premise (Broderick & Blewitt, 2006) from which other aspects of the second career counselor may be understood:

A former teacher... says, “The meaningfulness of the work is what is most gratifying about it. Seeing the powerful transformative potential from working deeply with clients’ core issues. Making the world a better place.
Doing good in the world. Those are the things that drew me to this.”
(Patterson, 2008, p. 13)

Meanings that inform and motivate adult learners to transition into new careers must include an understanding of where the students have come from in terms of their past experience as it relates to the present context of their new role (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). Inherent characteristics such as success in life experiences and earlier endeavors of nontraditional students often plays a significant role in second career student success within the academic realm and need to be understood and valued by counselor educators and supervisors in relation to how these characteristics can serve in the professional development of the second career counselor (Houser, 2006).

Community and Identity Challenges of Second Career Counselors

In a qualitative study of the socialization needs of students in doctoral programs, Gardner (2008) found that for older nontraditional students, students of color, and students with families, the experience of graduate education and the requirements of accommodating personal changes within the social context of university culture often did not fit their lifestyle and the diversity of their backgrounds, making them feel they did not fit the graduate school mold and resulting in a reduced feeling of fulfillment from their programs. Specifically, older nontraditional students felt disconnected from the shared values, aspirations, and goals of peers as well as having concerns about getting through their programs in the allotted amount of time. For these reasons, the research suggested that it is imperative for graduate programs to understand these differences in identity experiences as factors that ultimately influence students’ decisions to depart from doctoral degree programs. This research points to the fact that graduate counselor education programs must take into consideration the socialization process of their nontraditional and second career students in order to maintain the retention rates and graduation goals of their programs.

For some students, it is not age or diversity or background considerations that lead to a feeling of being out of place in the university setting, it can also be a sense of their age being incongruous with a new identity as a student, which in turn can lead to a feeling of not belonging (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). A central implication related to the difficulty of nontraditional students as it involves the acceptance and transition to a new identity is the need for a shared understanding between educators and students which ensures that these types of challenges encountered by students are acknowledged by faculty and addressed within the context of support offered to students (Bamber & Tett, 2000).

Many non-traditional students face other difficulties as well. In a qualitative study of a graduate degree program consisting of 17 participants (12 female and 5 male) ranging in age from 23 to 57 years, O'Donnell and Tobbell, (2007) found that adult nontraditional students were potentially more likely to be negatively affected when having had little recent experience of higher education and when they had additional life pressures outside of the university setting. Often, nontraditional students confront negative attitudes towards involvement in graduate programs from friends, parents, and partners. In cases where close relationships are supportive, it can have the effect of creating a significant positive impact on student success; without this level of support,
however, many carry the additional burden of increased stress throughout their graduate program (Bamber & Tett, 2000).

**Academic Environment Challenges of Second Career Counselors**

Instructors improve their teaching efficacy through an understanding of the importance of allowing older students to share and discuss their personal information and history (Houser, 2006). Of particular importance to second career students is a desire that the life and work experience they bring with them will be acknowledged and utilized within the academic context (Bamber & Tett, 2000).

In an experimental design research study, Houser (2006) found that traditional and nontraditional students have very different expectations of learning and instructional methods with traditional students having a significantly higher behavioral grade orientation and focus on results as a determinate of their success; while nontraditional students are more self-directed with the need for experiential learning and practical application related to the material being taught. This research also suggested that younger students desire instructors who act as guides and focus their efforts on imparting information to accomplish the teaching and learning tasks of their students. Older nontraditional students, on the other hand, want their academic learning environment to consist mainly of instructors who are willing to be straightforward in their teaching as well as respect their lifelong experiences while treating them as equals.

Results of Houser’s (2006) research also indicated that instructors need to be aware of classroom communication expectations of non-traditional students in order to leverage their higher level of learning motivation. These include experiential learning, relating material to their personal lives, relating the meaning of material to concerns beyond the classroom, how the material that is presented will meet their needs, and offering the opportunity for engaging discussions. Other significant findings from this research suggest that non-traditional students are more self-directed and less tolerant of “affinity-seeking” behaviors from professors that encourage students to like them. Too much relationship-engaging behavior from professors towards nontraditional students was found to negatively impact the learning environment.

**Efficacy of Current Models of Supervision in Relation to Second Career Counselors**

A fundamental component of the development of new counseling professionals is the clinical supervision of those who have progressed to the stage of practicing their craft beyond the level of theory and technique (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004; Neufeldt, 2001; Rønestad & Skovholt, 2003; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987). It is worth noting that as the task of supervision has been acknowledged as different from that of therapy (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004), the task of supervision is also different from that of educating supervisors themselves (Neufeldt, 2001).

Of importance to an inquiry into the subject of this paper is an understanding of the degree to which current supervision models are able to successfully leverage the advantages of second career counselors as well as remediate the risks associated with the unique challenges these student bring with them to the profession. As noted earlier, very little research can be found that delineates the task of supervising traditional first career counselors from that of older nontraditional or second career counselors as it relates to current supervision models and approaches. However, Bernard and Goodyear (2004)
have pointed out that “Most research has focused . . . on only [supervision] stage development models. Virtually none has examined effects of a life-span development model, except insofar as it overlaps at the earlier stages with the stage models” (p. 100)—a statement that implies a need for more research into the convergence of stage models with life-span development models as a way of addressing life focused transitions into the counseling field by older second career counselors.

The Emergence of Constructivist Supervision Models and Approaches

Nelson and Neufeldt (1998) define the construct of constructivism within the domain of counselor education pedagogy as follows:

Constructivism is rooted in the notion that our beliefs and assumptions, many of which are theoretical and many of which are grounded in data, are products of the meanings that we make in our social contexts. In this view, static models of "truth" that can be discovered and taught are seen as invalid. On the other hand, working hypotheses that are available for examination, testing, practical application, and reformulation are seen as more realistic. Whether one is an educator or a student, participating in the constructivist endeavor involves being an active participant in socially considering, questioning, evaluating, and inventing information. (p. 7)

Constructivism within the domain of education has been a long established and well defined approach to the pedagogy of teaching; and within the realm of counselor education, there is a significant body of literature that addresses the use of constructivism as an effective pedagogical approach to the development of counselors (Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2001; Sexton & Griffin, 1997). However, the same cannot be said in reference to the methods of clinical supervision or the pedagogy utilized in training clinical supervisors (Neufeldt, 2001; Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998). The reasons for the general absence of formalized use of constructivism within the domain of counselor supervision training can be attributed partly to the seemingly conflictual functions that supervision serves in the initial and ongoing development of counselors. The basis of this conflict in approach involves the need for manualized treatment curricula in order to teach basic counseling skills vs. the need for methods to develop the capacity for human relationship building in students; often resulting in the tenets of one approach being at odds with the other in meeting both of these developmental imperatives (Callaway & Stickel, 2001; Guiffrida, 2005; Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998).

The few recognized approaches to supervision that come under the umbrella of constructivism include narrative and solution focused orientations (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004) as well as collaborative methods (Wilson & Rozzelle, 2005). While there are no formalized structures of supervision that can be found in the literature recognized as the most effective approach in the professional development of second career counselors, this paper offers a constructivist orientation to supervision that seeks to leverage the unique advantages second career counselors bring into the profession; and mediates certain concomitant risks that are thought to impede their professional development.
Constructivist Supervision with Second Career Counselors

The use of a constructivist approach to supervision with second career counselors is offered as a way of leveraging the unique advantages that prior work experiences provide these students within the context of learning to be professional counselors. This view of constructivist supervision also attempts to apply its use as a way to remediate some of the challenges that older second career counselors often cope with in similar fashion to other nontraditional students when entering higher education at a time when life circumstances often intervene and conspire against them in ways different from traditional and first career students. An attempt is made to address these unique characteristics in terms of the protective and risk factors outlined earlier in this paper.

Constructivism in Addressing Community and Identity Challenges

People’s beliefs about their ability to reach a certain level of performance and competence often have an influence on the events that impact their lives and determine how they think, feel, and motivate themselves. Second career counselors may have felt very comfortable in their prior careers and their associated sense of self-efficacy may have been highly developed. However, transitioning to a new role as a graduate student and counselor trainee may negatively affect their sense of self-efficacy and confidence. Specifically, they may need to tell their professors, supervisors, and classmates of their previous experiences and successes as a way to insure that they are understood and valued for their past accomplishments; and it may also serve as a personal reminder of their intrinsic capabilities. O’Donnell and Tobbell’s (2007) research involving the facilitation of adults into higher education noted that when older students are:

In transition, the notion of identity is in the foreground because the new and strange practices force reconsideration of practice and therefore shifts in identity trajectories. The nature of the individual trajectory is constructed through the interaction of the past, present, and perhaps future aspirations of the student. (p. 315)

When situations arise in which second career counselors attenuate the meaning or value of a current learning context through comparison to their past experience or history, a constructivist approach would have educators reflectively assist students to consider their past experiences in the context of the present in order to understand how learning takes place in different educational contexts and can be built upon what they already know without devaluing the present (Bamber & Tett, 2000).

It can be easy to interpret references to past experience by second career counselors as an attempt to devalue an instructor’s expertise or competency (Brown-Rice & Burton, 2009). Neufeldt (2001) presents the constructivist view of the need for supervisors to use an inquiry approach as a strategy for understanding and hypothesizing reasons for the counselee’s behavior. It may also be helpful to consider that all students construct their experience in the context of the milieu of social settings, cultural values, and economic and political circumstances that may point to other less obvious reasons for patterns of behavior (Bamber & Tett, 2000; Callaway & Stickel, 2001).
Constructivism in Addressing Meaning in Academic Learning and Practice

Meaning is developed through the experiential nature of living our lives in the ongoing interaction with the world around us (O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). The premise of the increasing trend of second career counselors is a function of many students having reached the life-stage of generativity as motivation behind their desire to enter into the counseling field (Patterson, 2008). While age and the feeling of being old are often a concern for older second career counselors because of their fears related to ageism and not fitting the graduate school mold, most feel that the experience they bring to the profession is of great value in underpinning a contribution to others with what they have already learned in their lives (Gardner, 2008). Constructivist supervision approaches that encourage reflectivity as a strategy for working through “messy” and ambiguous client problems has been shown to be an effective method used for developing competency in counselors (Neufeldt, 2001). Its use as a necessary tool in long-term professional development has also been shown to be of value in the ongoing growth of therapists from beginning student to senior professional (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). This constructivist approach can also be especially helpful to supervisors in leveraging the life experience of second career counselors by encouraging its use by students as a method of bringing life-experience into focus when approaching problems regularly encountered in school and professional practice to which standard approaches may not apply (Neufeldt, 2001).

Constructivism in Addressing Academic Environment Challenges

Constructivist supervisors take the position of inviting supervisees not to accept time-honored ideas, as well as understanding the value of encouraging students to create their own knowledge out of the process of individually or collectively solving the problem situations with which they are presented. The value of this approach is to allow students the opportunity to increase their capacity to test their intellectual knowledge and judgment beyond the traditional didactic impartation of information (Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998). Through a research study inquiring into the process of counseling program development, McAuliffe (2002) found that there was a “movement toward constructivism” (p. 212) as students were encouraged to employ constructivist methods such as reflectivity and dialogue and subsequently began to recognize that knowledge was created through their own activities. McAuliffe’s work also involved increasing students’ capacities for reflectivity which led to greater autonomy and dialoguing ability. The results of the study indicated that as instructors used constructivist methods of training, students became constructivists in their orientation to counseling technique and addressing client issues.

In a qualitative study of a graduate degree program made up of 17 older adult participants, O’Donnell and Tobbell, (2007) found that after being offered traditional styled didactic classes, older students felt that learning only took place for them after actually engaging in the performance of the activities themselves. Further results identified in the study suggested:

Dialogue also allowed many of the participants in this study to arrive at explanations which made sense to them… and for many of the participants it was peers, friends, or colleagues whose explanations helped them to negotiate meaning and arrive at understandings, rather than the
explanations of teaching staff… The adult learners’ experiences reflected this, in that although attempts were made by course tutors to “teach” certain study skills to students through dedicated classes, the students only truly began to make progress in the learning of these skills by actively engaging in them. (O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007, p. 322)

Connections can easily be made from results derived from the significant body of educational research involving adult learners and its application to second career counselors in regard to their need for constructivist teaching approaches to counselor education and professional development. These results also point to constructivism as the most effective method of counselor supervision for this distinct group of students. As O’Donnell and Tobell’s (2007) work suggests: older nontraditional students themselves are the best testimony to the efficacy of constructivist approaches for supervision and training.

**Risks in the Use of Constructivist Approaches**

There are certain risks found in the literature that are thought to be associated with the use of constructivist approaches to supervision. These include questioning the applicability of constructivist approaches with supervisees whose basic interpersonal skills are deficient; the question of what to do if a student fails to learn; and a concern that supervisors might spend so much time in constructivist methods of inquiry, thinking and exploration, that there may be a risk of diminishing supervisor effectiveness with supervisees (Neufeldt, 2001). Bamber and Tett (2000) also pointed out the risks associated with experience being paradoxical in its foundational role as the basis for learning as well as its having the capacity to distort, constrain, and limit.

**Future Research into the Constructivist Supervision Approach**

In view of the limited amount of research regarding supervision of second career counselors and the increasing trend of these students entering into counseling domains, clinical supervision models and approaches need to be assessed for their capacity to adequately address the supervision and professional development needs of second career graduate student counselors, as well as other types of non-traditional students. Does the constructivist approach indeed offer the greatest degree of efficacy in its use with second career counselors? Professors and supervisors could benefit from empirical data that would inform the performance of supervisory tasks with second career counselors beyond the frustration that often accompanies many of their interactions with these students (Brown-Rice & Burton, 2009). Approaches and models need to be studied from the perspective of understanding which ones can best leverage and extend the life experience brought by second career counselors in order more effectively assist in meeting client needs as well as help facilitate these students’ goal of “giving back” (Patterson, 2008).

**Conclusion**

Within the counselor education and supervision domain, there exists both the advent of the second career counselor phenomenon of increasing presence in the field, and a significant gap in the literature about how to most effectively deal with the
challenges these students present to graduate programs in counselor education. While not empirically documented as the most efficacious approach to the task of educating this unique group of students, the general field of adult education offers a compelling rationale that promotes the use of constructivism as the most promising framework for successful supervision and instructional outcomes. From this perspective, constructivist approaches can be thought to offer students, professors, and supervisors the best avenue towards meeting the needs of second career counselors in their journey towards professional development.

References


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