Article 52

A Framework for Teaching Undergraduate Courses on Counseling Psychology: Implications for Occupational and Educational Aspirations

Courtney E. Gasser

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Gasser, Courtney E., PhD, is an Assistant Professor at the University of Baltimore. As a licensed psychologist in the state of Maryland and a nationally certified counselor, Dr. Gasser enjoys training and supervising counseling students and professionals, performing career counseling outreach in the community, and investigating vocational psychology topics. Her research has focused on helping adult students in career transition.

Abstract

Consistent with the discipline, undergraduate courses about the field of counseling psychology (CP) should focus on the themes of counseling research, practice, and theory. Pedagogical suggestions for this framework are presented. Preliminary findings regarding the usefulness of this structure were highlighted through students' post-course reports. Evidence suggested that students felt they learned about CP research, clinical practice, and theory within the course, and thought that what they learned was relevant to their careers and life. Pretest and posttest comparisons demonstrated that, though the students' occupational aspirations did not significantly change, their educational aspirations decreased by the end of the course as hypothesized.

Course content should closely mirror the subject matter being taught. As a counseling psychologist teaching undergraduate courses on the profession of counseling psychology (CP), I sought to bring the field of CP to life for undergraduates appropriate to their level of study. In CP graduate training, emphasis is placed on utilizing research, counseling practice, and theory to improve people's mental health and well-being. It should be noted that CP as a discipline is similar to and yet different from the discipline of counselor education, both of which have overlapping histories and skill sets, but are distinct professions in their own right. More information about these two professions can be found in the literature (Atkinson, 2002; Bernard, 2006; Fouad, Carter, & Subich, 2012a, 2012b). Since this university offers master's level counselor training housed in a psychology department, the faculty believe that an undergraduate course on CP helps provide students with more information about the field of CP and how it compares and contrasts with other related fields. Armed with such information, students may be better poised to make career decisions regarding what field of study they wish to pursue.

Through reading the syllabi of past instructors, I found that a variety of other professionals who had previously taught the course had only focused on the "counseling" part of CP. Though a focus on learning counseling skills is valuable, another course at this university was created to teach helping skills to undergraduates, which again is related to but different from a course on CP. In discussions with colleagues, a theme emerged that other professionals without specific training in CP seemed to lack a clear picture of what CP is and therefore left important pieces (such as the emphasis in CP on the research that supports our counseling practices) out of the CP course when teaching it. These themes are integral to the identity of CP and inherent in the scientist-practitioner training model that most CP graduate programs utilize (Gelso & Fretz 2001). According to Gelso and Fretz (2001), scientist-practitioners are trained as competent researchers and clinicians who apply research results to their clinical practice, consider what is needed for clinical practice in forming their research questions and agendas, and apply scientific inquiry in monitoring the work done in both research and clinical capacities. Also, scientist-practitioners rely heavily on theory in guiding their practice and research work; hence, the knowledge of theory is integral to understanding the field of CP and the approach of counseling psychologists (Gelso & Fretz 2001). Therefore, teaching undergraduates about this field suggests that they be instructed in the major themes in research, practice, and theory relevant to helping people improve their life satisfaction and mental health.

In this article, I propose a framework for teaching undergraduate courses on CP based on focusing on the themes of CP research, practice, and theory. First, I present a review of literature pertaining to pedagogy with undergraduate college students. Second, I outline a framework for teaching undergraduate CP courses, and then identify specific pedagogical recommendations. Third, I present preliminary data on students' perspectives on this teaching framework. Finally, a sample syllabus for an introductory CP course based on this framework is provided in the appendix.

Existing Literature

No one article was identified that addressed a comprehensive teaching strategy specifically for undergraduate counseling psychology courses. Most closely related to the topic were articles on teaching components of the three-part framework proposed in the current article. In terms of research instruction, authors have proposed methods regarding teaching scientific reasoning (Eflin & Kite 1996), using case studies (Aberson 2005), and having a mentored research experience (Kardash 2000). In undergraduate counseling skills instruction, a number of excellent techniques and suggestions have been offered and investigated (Hill et al., 2008; Korn, 1980; Naar, 1974; Payne & Woudenberg, 1978; Sommers-Flanagan & Heck, 2012). For example, Sommers-Flanagan and Heck (2012) provided a guide on how to plan and facilitate courses devoted to counseling skills training. Also, Hill et al. (2008) recommended that students learn counseling skills via dyadic role-playing exercises. Furthermore, authors have devised creative methods of teaching students how to implement therapeutic interventions. Goldstein (1993) developed a collaborative learning project where students designed a clinical workshop. Also, Lambert and Lenthall (1988) advocated use of computerized case simulations to teach clinical diagnostic and intervention skills.

Teaching counseling theory has been addressed by many authors. Particularly relevant to CP are approaches that focus on pedagogical practices for personality (e.g., Hess 1976), counseling theory (e.g., Miserandino et al., 2000), and multicultural counseling courses (e.g., Alvarez & Miville 2003). Though this literature is relevant to pedagogy in each of the three major areas of CP coursework, no article was found which focused on a comprehensive approach to instruction of undergraduate counseling psychology courses. Thus, I propose a comprehensive framework for teaching classes on CP.

A Framework for Teaching Counseling Psychology

Given that no work has been found that directly advises on how to teach a CP course, it seems helpful to advance a framework for this purpose. CP courses can benefit from introducing students to CP research, clinical practice, and theory by overtly emphasizing this framework from the first day of class and throughout the course. In my formulation, the format of the class involved discussions, lecture, and class activities designed to promote deeper understanding of the concepts along the three themes. Specific strategies utilized in teaching the course are detailed below. For more information on the course itself, please see the Appendix for a sample course syllabus.

Research Learning

With regard to the research theme, students were exposed throughout the course to the research findings regarding different aspects of theory and clinical practice. Also, students were given a major writing assignment where they needed to select one recent empirical research article from a prominent journal in CP (either the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* or *The Counseling Psychologist*) and review and critique that article. In selecting the article, students were asked to focus on what topics interested them most in order to learn more about the research being done in CP. Students explained how the results of the article related to the field of CP and described in their own words the "take home" message of the research article.

Also, students worked in small groups to compare and contrast the major designs used in CP research. Each group took one of the designs and came up with a short description of it, the pros and cons of using it, and then presented this information verbally to the class. This group work was then compiled and shared with all the students for use as a study aid. Finally, all students were given the option to experience being a research participant to learn more about how research is conducted.

Clinical Practice Learning

Throughout the course, counseling examples were explained to aid students' learning about research and theory as well as counseling itself. In addition, students were able to learn about counseling skills and techniques by practicing them with classmates using a role-play format. To deepen their processing of this experience, students wrote a short reaction paper about what it was like to be in the counselor role during their class role-plays.

These exercises provided an opportunity for students to get a taste of what it is like to sit in the helper's role as well as the client's role; for more information on this

teaching strategy, please see Hill et al. (2008) and Anderson, Gundersen, Banken, and Halvorson (1989). Beyond these exercises, students participated in a class assignment where they were clients for graduate students in the master's counseling program for a minimum of three sessions (it should be noted that, for ethical reasons, students were given a choice to opt out of the counseling session assignment and instead complete a series of journaling self-awareness exercises). Interestingly, some of these students chose to extend their counseling sessions with their graduate student helpers beyond the three sessions. Afterwards, students discussed in a short paper their thoughts about the talking cure as a healing method, based on their experiences. In order to support student confidentiality and privacy, they were not required to discuss the actual content of their sessions in the paper.

Discussion of real-world applications of counseling concepts was another strategy. For instance, student interest was usually piqued when discussing such questions as "What do counselors do when they find out their client murdered someone 15 years ago? What does this mean for confidentiality?", "How can career counseling theories actually help me?", and "What would a consulting counseling psychologist do to improve our university? Our local hospitals? Our schools?"

Finally, an experiential exercise was used to facilitate student understanding of group counseling. In this simulation, the class sat in a circle and shared embarrassing moments with one another (Ritchie, 2006). It was important to let them know that verbal participation was voluntary (students who chose not to share were allowed to remain in the group activity as observers) and that they should support one another's sharing using the basic counseling skills of reflection and empathy. Afterwards, the instructor helped them process the experience of being in a group like this (Ritchie, 2006).

Theory Learning

Similar to the other major content areas, theories were also emphasized throughout the course and connections were made between theoretical perspectives and different rationales for research directions and counseling practices. Students were exposed to a digest version of the theories that are taught frequently in CP graduate education. The Gelso and Fretz textbook, *Counseling Psychology* (2001), presented the major theories of counseling (psychoanalytic/psychodynamic, cognitive and/or behavioral, humanistic) as well as systems and career counseling theories. The instructor explained these theories and through discussion sought to expand students' understanding of the theories by applying them to real-world situations. Also, the use of humor was used to increase comprehension of counseling theories by incorporating popular jokes about the theories and/or theorists. For example, there are good jokes about major counseling theorists like Carl Rogers and Albert Ellis that reflect their different approaches. Instructors can learn about these, or make up their own. It is possible for everyone to have a good laugh and then talk about how the joke represents the concepts about the theory.

Additionally, students' learning about multicultural theory and concepts was augmented by a multicultural identities activity. The instructor hung signs around the room describing different categories of multicultural identities (e.g., size, nationality, gender, position). Then, the students wrote down what they saw as their four or five key identities, and discussed their choices in small groups. Afterwards, the instructor

facilitated a large group discussion of these identities and the different levels of power and privilege associated with them based on the context.

Bring It All Together: CP as a Profession

During the course, students were also directed to think more on the possibility of CP as a career path through a variety of exercises and assignments. For example, after learning about the training of counseling psychologists, they were asked to free-write for 5 minutes on their reactions to what it takes to become a counseling psychologist. Again, please the Appendix for a sample course syllabus.

Current Study

In order to investigate the three-part teaching framework proposed in this paper, student perceptions of the usefulness of providing an undergraduate-appropriate experience of the major training elements for counseling psychologists were examined. Also, since some students indicated that they take topical courses such as CP to gauge their interest in CP as a career path, this author investigated the occupational and educational aspirations of students enrolled in undergraduate courses on CP. Occupational aspirations pertain to the career choice a person desires to attain, and educational aspirations refer to the level of education a person intends to achieve. This instructor conducted analyses of student survey responses using a pretest/posttest design.

Hypotheses and Rationale

A number of hypotheses were advanced in the current study. First, it was expected that students would leave the class feeling like they learned much about CP research, practice, and theory. These three elements were emphasized throughout the course, were reflected in the course structure, and were taught in a manner that helped students apply concepts to their lives and the world around them. Therefore, the first hypothesis was that students would consider themselves knowledgeable about these course components, feeling like they really learned something about CP. As a second, related hypothesis, it was expected that students would value this knowledge and consider it salient to their lives and career paths.

Third, it was expected that occupational aspirations for CP would decrease, so that most students would lose interest in a CP career path by the end of the course. Though the students might value learning about CP, CP is a demanding field in terms of the time, money, and energy required to invest in one's training as a counseling psychologist as opposed to other fields such as counseling (Gelso & Fretz, 2001). For example, a person can be an independent counselor with a master's degree and license, which costs less and takes less time than the doctoral degree and license required to be a counseling psychologist. The course instructor as well as the textbook was overt about these issues with students, which was believed to shape attitudes at least in part.

Fourth, it was hypothesized that students' educational aspirations would also decrease, meaning that their desired levels of educational attainment might decrease as they learned more about what a doctoral level degree in CP often entails. This hypothesis was based on the notion that students who wish to take a class on "counseling psychology" might not know that there is a difference between this more research-oriented, doctoral level path and that of the practice-oriented master's degree level path

of "counseling." Once educated about these and other differences, it was thought that students' educational aspirations would adjust, and ultimately decrease.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 32 college students (women: $n=24$; men: $n=8$). Age ranged from 19 to 51 (M= 31.3; SD=10.6). The sample's ethnicity was 55.9% European American, 35.3% African-American, and 2.9% Asian or Pacific Islander (5.9% did not respond). Regarding marital status, 61.8% were single, 14.7% were married, 14.7% were divorced or separated, and 2.9% were engaged (5.9% did not respond). Everyone who responded had declared a major, and of these, only 2.9% considered themselves only tentatively decided about their choice of major. Though 41.2% indicated they had decided on a career, 32.4% were tentatively decided on a career and 20.6% considered themselves undecided about a career.

Procedures

One instructor taught two sections of the 300-level undergraduate course titled "Counseling Psychology" in the fall of 2007 and 2008 and made every attempt to teach both sections as similarly as possible. Therefore, no changes were made to the class structure, content, activities, or textbook across the two semesters. The decision to teach both classes the same way was as much for data collection reasons as it was for pedagogical ones: similarity among the courses justified the decision to analyze them as one sample, and pedagogically the course approach seemed effective.

In the first class, the pretest questionnaire was administered after a brief explanation of informed consent and the right of each student to choose not to participate without penalty. Students were also assured that no identifying information would be collected and that their responses would be analyzed after grades were submitted. After the questionnaires were completed, the course officially began. At the end of the semester, students completed the posttest questionnaire in the last class period.

The course involved introducing students to CP research, clinical practice, and theory via a variety of student projects emphasizing this framework. On the first day, students were informed of this framework, and were reminded of the three major themes throughout the course. The format of the class involved discussions, lecture, and class activities designed to promote deeper understanding of the concepts. During the course, students were also directed to think more on the possibility of CP as a career path through a variety of exercises and assignments. For example, as previously mentioned, after learning about the training of counseling psychologists, they were asked to freewrite for 5 minutes on their reactions to what it takes to become a counseling psychologist.

Measures

Both the pretest and posttest questionnaires were constructed by the course instructor and consisted of a variety of forced-choice and open questions. Occupational aspirations were measured by asking the students questions like "Are you considering counseling psychology as a career option?" with response options of *yes*, *no*, and *maybe*. Educational aspirations were measured by asking, "What level of education do you hope

to achieve?" Response options included some college, bachelor's degree, master's degree, doctoral degree, and other (which included an option to write in a response). For analyses, these response options were coded 1 (some college) to 5 (other). Other questions were asked using a scale of 1 (poor) to 10 (excellent), such as how difficult the student viewed the career path of becoming a counseling psychologist, how demanding the course was, and their ratings of the course and of the instructor. Open questions included items like "Why are you taking this class?"
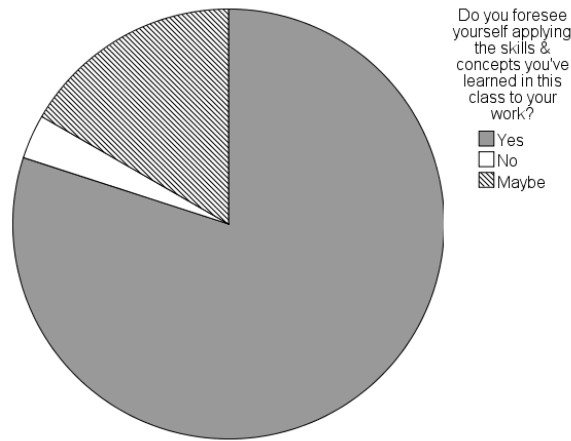

Figure 1. Perceived Applicability of Course to Students' Future Work.

Results

Pretest and posttest questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics and paired samples t-tests. In the post-test evaluation, students were asked about their degree of perceived learning in the course related to CP research, practice, and theory, using the following scale: did not increase knowledge, uncertain, somewhat, and very much increased. In focusing on those who rated their knowledge as "very much increased" by the course, 32.4% indicated such for CP research, 58.8% for practice, and 50% for theory. Also, post-course findings indicated that students saw the course concepts and skills as applicable to their work (70.6% indicated "yes") and to their lives (79.4%); see Figures 1 and 2. Thus, both the first and second hypotheses were supported.

In regards to the third hypothesis, students reported that 8.8% of them did change their occupational aspirations since the beginning of the semester, and 8.8% indicated that their career plans changed as a result of the course. When comparing pre- and posttest results in regards to occupational aspirations via a t-test, no significant results were found ($t = -0.24$; $p < .81$). However, when looking at the descriptive statistics for this variable, 29.4%, or 10 respondents, indicated they were interested in CP as a career option at the beginning of the course, whereas only 17.6%, or 6 respondents, indicated the same at the end of the course. Indeed, most students perceived the career path of counseling psychologists as difficult, with 76.5% of ratings at 7 or above on a 1 to 10 scale. In fact, a post-hoc t-test revealed that there was a significant difference between students' post-course ratings of the perceived difficulty of becoming a counseling psychologist (doctoral-level specialty) versus a licensed counselor (master's level; $t = 2.45$; $p < .05$). Therefore, the third hypothesis was not supported because there was no

significant difference in occupational aspirations from pre- to posttest, though the evidence did support a nonsignificant decrease in occupational aspirations.
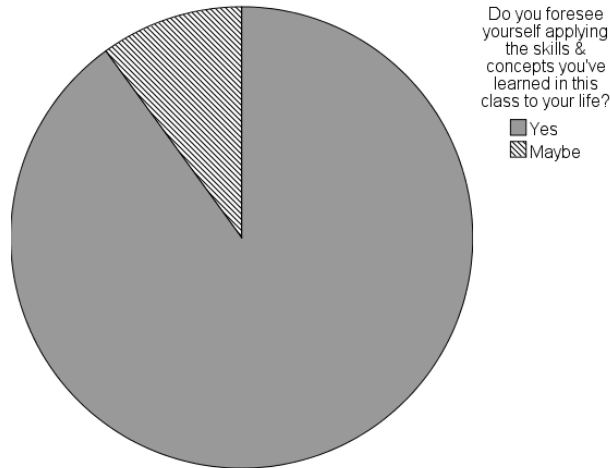

Figure 2. Perceived Applicability of Course to Students' Lives.

In regards to educational aspirations, t-test results indicated a statistically significant difference from pre- to posttest ($t = 5.30$; $p < .001$). Upon examination of the means, it was determined that the educational aspirations of the students as a group decreased over the semester (pretest: M = 3.79; posttest: M = 2.83). Therefore, the fourth hypothesis was supported.

Additionally, students' ratings of the course difficulty, course overall, and instructor were collected. For each of these questions, students were asked to make ratings using a 1 to 10 scale (for course difficulty, the poles were "easy" and "difficult;" for the other two ratings, the poles were "poor" and "excellent"). Using the criteria of a rating of 7 or above, course difficulty was rated at a 73.5% (meaning that 73.5% of students rated it at 7 or above on a 10 point scale), the course overall at an 82.3%, and the course instructor at an 88.1%. Furthermore, 67.6% saw their experience with their graduate student counselor as positive, while 14.7% thought it was a mixed experience.

Discussion

Preliminary Findings and Implications

In regards to the first hypothesis, students did see themselves as learning a lot about CP research, practice, and theory. It is encouraging that this first hypothesis was supported by the data, especially since these were the three major thrusts of the course. Also, in regards to hypothesis two, what they learned was meaningful to them. Consistent with predictions, about 70% students thought the course skills and concepts were applicable to their work, and about 80% thought what they learned was applicable to their lives. Since helping people is an integral theme to CP, the course involved a lot of lecture and discussion on how to understand people better and be more effective in communicating and working with them. These types of things are important in any walk of life, and it seems the majority of the students thought so, too.

Some evidence for the third hypothesis was found, in that occupational aspirations did decrease somewhat, though not enough to be considered statistically significant.

Specifically, the t-test results indicated that there was no major change in occupational aspirations, though descriptive statistics showed that six of the students were considering CP as a career at the end of the course. When compared to the 10 students considering CP as a career option at the start of the course, a small difference is revealed. Perhaps with a larger sample, a statistically significant change might be detected. At this point, the third hypothesis was not fully supported by the data, so we cannot at this point conclude that occupational aspirations significantly decreased.

Though there is some evidence that at least a few students stopped considering CP as a career path, some did not. Given that about 41% of the students considered themselves decided on a career at the beginning of the course, it makes sense that not many of them would probably be in the course for the reason of deciding on a career— almost half had already decided. As a 300-level course, the class is usually taken by college juniors and seniors, which may have implications for student career development and university curriculum. Potentially, students have decided on a career path at this university before they get to this course, and so it might be better for them to take topical courses like this prior to this point in their career development. If this is true, then curriculum changes such as perhaps restructuring the course to a 200-level experience might make it more accessible to first and second year students. However, not everyone is meant to become a counseling psychologist, so these conclusions are tenuous at best, given the current evidence.

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that though all who responded indicated that they had decided on a major, only 41% of students had decided on a career, with about 53% being at least somewhat unsure of what careers they wished to pursue. Therefore, this suggests that topical courses, such as this one on CP, can play an important role in exposing students to and helping them learn about possible career paths. Though undoubtedly some students take these courses for non-occupational reasons (e.g., needing to fulfill a degree requirement or finding a course that better fits into one's schedule), at least some of them have career needs and questions in mind.

In regards to the fourth hypothesis, a decrease in educational aspirations was borne out by the data. T-test results and subsequent evaluation of the means showed significant decreases in students' educational aspirations when measured at the beginning and end of the course. This was expected since some students seem to want additional education beyond the baccalaureate level, especially since many prestigious careers tend to require graduate education (e.g., doctors and lawyers). However, the realities of gaining this education come with costs in terms of time, money, and energy, and even with more of these resources, not everyone possesses the intellectual capacity or sustained interest required for doctoral-level work. Since these realities were openly addressed in this course due to the variety of career paths compared to and contrasted with CP, it follows that students might adjust their educational aspirations accordingly. For example, students learn that if they want to help people by counseling them, they do not necessarily need to choose to become a counseling psychologist. Careers in counseling and social work may only require a master's degree and a license to practice and may be more attractive to employers and managed care organizations because their services are more affordable (Gelso & Fretz, 2001). In contrast, by law one must have earned a doctoral degree and a license to be called a counseling psychologist, which again takes more resources. Thus, it is possible for students to attain their career goals by

aiming for a different educational level, and this reality can subsequently have an effect on their educational aspirations. Indeed, about 76% of the students saw the career path of counseling psychologists as demanding and thought that becoming a licensed master's level counselor would be less difficult.

Finally, the students tended to see the course as a difficult yet enjoyable experience. Since the instructor aimed to make the course experience analogous to the field of CP, which she saw as a potentially difficult yet enjoyable field, these findings seem to support the idea that this aim in some part was achieved.

Limitations

Limitations of the study included the small sample size of 32, as well as the small percentage (25%) of men in the sample. These limitations could be addressed by collecting a larger sample, and perhaps over time a more gender-balanced sample might be achieved. Also, these results are limited by use of one instructor. Though having the same instructor across the two sections increased consistency of experience for the students, it is unclear to what extent these findings may be dependent on characteristics of this particular instructor. In future studies, it would be informative to gather data on other undergraduate courses on counseling psychology with different instructors.

Pedagogically, a limitation pointed out by these results is that students did not think that they learned as much about research (33%) as they did counseling (59%) and theory (50%). Even though another 44% of students did indicate that they felt their knowledge about research was "somewhat increased" (increasing the percentage of their rated learning about research to 76%), the criteria of thinking their knowledge was "very much increased" was not met at the same levels as the other two major facets of the course. Since the instructor saw research-driven discussions as part of the backbone of each class period, it may be that students did not make this same connection and that more could be done to either help make this link or otherwise increase their learning about the research. In any event, if students do not feel they have learned "very much" about research, something needs to be changed to help increase their comprehension.

Finally, this research could have been improved by measuring learning about the three major course elements using learning outcomes. Instead, students were surveyed regarding their perceived learning, which offers useful information about what they think they learned. However, future work can be strengthened by also employing more objective measurement of their actual learning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper focused on a comprehensive, three part approach to teaching undergraduate courses on counseling psychology and presented a number of pedagogical suggestions. Focusing on the themes of research, clinical practice, and theory were supported in part by students' reports of being more knowledgeable about these areas. The data provide only limited and preliminary support for the teaching framework proposed. Further research is needed in order to evidence the effectiveness of this framework. Also, the course appeared to not significantly change students' occupational aspirations, though other evidence suggests that some students felt their career plans were influenced by the course. As expected, students' educational aspirations were found to

decrease over the semester. In conclusion, it appears that most students found the course beneficial and useful in a variety of ways.

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