Article 12

Career Choice Influences:
The Self-Efficacy Profiles of Counseling Students

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Abstract

This study describes the self-efficacy profiles of 13 counseling students by examining their score on the Counselor Activity Self-Efficacy Scales (CASES), developed by Lent, Hill, and Hoffman (2003), in relation to the primary influence on their career choice. The results of this study, along with implications for counseling supervision, are reported.

Keywords: counseling, self-efficacy, supervision, counselor education

Introduction

Lent et al. (2006) defined counselor self-efficacy as a counselor's belief about her or his ability to demonstrate specific counseling skills. According to Leach, Stoltenberg, McNeil, and Eichenfield (1997), in the past, there have not been an overwhelming number of studies concerning self-efficacy of counselor trainees. However, the counseling profession has since experienced a growing trend in research studies on counselor self-efficacy, which is visible in studies conducted by Barbee, Scherer, and Combs (2003), Lent et al. (2006), as well as Reese et al. (2009). These studies have explored self-efficacy in relation to a myriad of counseling-related concepts. Barbee et al. (2003) found that prepracticum service learning has a positive relationship with counselor self-efficacy. Lent et al. (2006) examined the relationship between counselor trainees' self-efficacy and their perception of session work with clients. Reese et al. (2009) found that trainees who received client feedback reported self-efficacy levels more closely aligned with the actual display of their skills in therapeutic sessions.

The preceding paragraph highlights the importance of counselor trainees' sense of efficacy in their work with clients, which fuels a portion of the current research question that seeks to examine what initially piqued counselor trainees' interest in the counseling profession. A qualitative study conducted by Huynh and Rhodes (2011) found that there were several factors that influenced undergraduate psychology students to join the helping profession. These factors included the influence of distressing events, such as self-esteem issues, or childhood abuse. Other participants joined the field due to services that they received from professionals. Still other participants reported a need to understand themselves. Some participants indicated that they had prior experience with helping others, such as volunteering, and that this is what made them want to join the field. Participants also reported the influence of role models as a factor that influenced their decision to help others. Lastly, some participants indicated that they received career advice from someone else, which influenced their decision to join the profession.

Krumboltz (1998) indicated that unplanned events can affect an individual's career choice. Determining if there is a connection between these unplanned events and a counselor trainee's self-efficacy scores holds potential for providing counselor supervisors with the tools to help counselor trainees recognize possible unresolved issues and the way in which these issues manifest in their work with clients. Rubin (2009) supported this notion by expressing that there is often a conflict in the field between whether a psychoanalyst is more interested in helping others, or introspection. Williams et al. (1998) highlighted the importance of understanding that planned and unplanned events are often interwoven for the sake of career development and professional opportunities. Therefore, examining the relationship between counselor trainees' self-efficacy scores and the factors that influenced their career choice could prove to be an additional learning tool for the counselor supervision process.

Self-Efficacy and Counselor Supervision

The study of self-efficacy is not a novel concept in research literature. Bandura (1982) studied the influence of self-efficacy upon thoughts, actions, and emotions. Self-efficacy is research worthy as it relates to counselor supervision because, according to Bandura (1982), a person who perceives herself or himself to be efficacious is more likely to persist towards successfully completing a task; for beginning counselors, this task at hand would be their work with clients. Similarly, Daniels and Larson (1998) asserted that low counselor self-efficacy could lead to an unwillingness for counselors-in-training to take risks. The authors go on to point out that counselors-in-training with low self-efficacy may also lack the drive to persevere when faced with the possibility of failure. This could raise many implications for training counselors in their work with clients since increasing counselor self-efficacy could yield efficacious work with clients (Daniels & Larson, 1998).

Self-efficacy has been explored as a vehicle for enhancing the supervision experience. Barnes (2004) described self-efficacy enhancing techniques that could be used with counselors-in-training who are struggling with their skill development. The author pointed out that working with a counselor-in-training to examine her or his self-efficacy is also important from the perspective that sometimes counselors-in-training may overestimate their skill level and could, therefore, be working beyond their level of competence. Barnes (2004) highlighted the fact that encouraging counselors-in-training

to explore their self-efficacy beliefs can promote self-reflection, thereby permitting the counselor-in-training to play an active role in the evolution of their own personal and professional growth.

Personal and professional growth can also be shaped by a counselor trainee's ability to recognize if an unresolved issue influenced his/her career choice, which could ultimately affect his/her work with clients in the form of countertransference (Hill & O'Brien, 1999). According to Hill and O'Brien (1999), countertransference is the counselor's reaction to the client that is primarily rooted in the counselor's own unresolved issues. Ivey (2013) described the occurrence of countertransference as an "entanglement with the therapist's internal conflicts" (p. 237). Assisting counselors-in-training with the ability to recognize these unresolved issues could equip them with the necessary tools for knowing thyself; knowing thyself has been identified as one of the many critical goals in the pursuit of education (Palmer, 1983).

Purpose of the Study

This research will examine the primary influencing factor on counselor trainees' career choice, as it relates to their self-efficacy scores. The goal of this study is to provide counselor educators and supervisors with insight on the possible connection between individuals' motivation for joining the counseling field and their level of self-efficacy when working with clients. Exploring this connection then provides counselor trainees with the opportunity to examine if the primary influence on their career choice serves as an asset or an interference to their work with clients. This process benefits the clients who receive support from counselors who are attuned to how their motivations for joining the counseling field impact their perceived ability to effectively work with clients.

Method

Participants

After obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board, participants were selected based on their current academic standing in a counseling program in the Southeast region of the United States. All students on the professional mental health track entering their final term of internship were invited to participate. Upon entering their final term of internship, students have completed all of their required core coursework as well as one practicum and 300 hours of the first phase of internship. The students were contacted via telephone by the author and made aware of what participation in the study would involve. All of the students who were contacted agreed to participate in the study.

There were a total of 13 participants who ranged in age from 26–60; the majority of which (n=5, 38.46%) fell in the age range of 26–30. The participants in this study were also similar in gender and ethnicity; twelve (92%) were females and eleven (85%) identified as African American. Nearly half, or six, of the participants reported that they did not have prior work experience in the counseling field. Seven of the participants reported that they did have previous experience in the counseling field. Two of the participants reported that they had 9 or more years of experience. Three of the participants stated that they had 0–2 years of experience and two of the participants stated that they had 3–5 years of experience.

Measures

A background questionnaire was used in combination with the Counselor Activity Self-Efficacy Scales (Lent, Hill, & Hoffman, 2003) to measure counselor trainees' self-efficacy and to capture the factor that most influenced the counselor trainees' decision to join the helping profession. The Counselor Activity Self-Efficacy Scales (Lent et al., 2003) consist of three parts. Part I consists of the Helping Skills Self-Efficacy Scale. Part II consists of Session Management Self-Efficacy and Part III consists of Counseling Challenges Self-Efficacy. Higher scores on each scale indicate more self-reported confidence in the participant's counseling skills. The Helping Skills Self-Efficacy Scale consists of a total of 15 items: Insight Skills (6 items; e.g., the ability to confront); Exploration Skills (5 items; e.g., active use of attending skills); and Action Skills (4 items; e.g., assigning homework). There were 10 Session Management Self-Efficacy Scale items that assessed clinical skills, such as being able to remain task oriented during the session. Lastly, the Counseling Challenges Self-Efficacy Scale consists of Relationship Conflict, represented by 10 items, and Client Distress, represented by six items. Relationship Conflict (10 items), assessed, for example, the counselor's ability to work with a client toward whom she or he may experience negative feelings. The second set of items on the Counseling Challenges Self-Efficacy Scale is Client Distress (6 items), which refers to, for example, the counselor's ability to work with a client who has experienced recent trauma.

The development and validation process of the Counselor Activity Self-Efficacy Scales by Lent et al. (2003) had strong validity evidence, with correlations between the Counselor Activity Self-Efficacy Scales and Social Desirability ranging from -.02 to .22. The correlation was not significant, thus supporting the scales' convergent and discriminant validity. The level of internal reliability for the scales, which ranged from .79 for Exploration Skills to .94 for Session Management and Client Distress, also contributed to the strong measurement feature of the scales. The Counselor Activity Self-Efficacy total scale yielded reliability of .97 as measured by the alpha coefficient.

Procedure

University administrative staff provided each of the students with a separate work space in vacant offices. Participants were asked to sign a consent form and were provided with a copy of the signed form. The consent forms were kept separate from the actual research instruments. Participants were asked not to include their names on the background questionnaire and the Counselor Activity Self-Efficacy Scales. Instead, these items were coded with numbers. Participants were asked to respond to demographic questions that consisted of gender, ethnicity, age, prior experience in the counseling field, and number of years of experience within the field. Lastly, participants were asked to select the primary influencing factor on their decision to become a counselor. Participants were given nine categories from which they could select only one response and were provided with examples of responses that would be consistent with each category. The categories were inspired by previous research literature by Mitchell, Levin, and Krumboltz (1999) on the significance of planned and unplanned events that lead to career choice. Additionally, the themes found in the qualitative study conducted by Huynh and Rhodes (2011) on the factors that influenced a student's decision to join the helping profession provided the framework for the development of the primary influence

categories presented in this study. The categories and examples were reviewed for accuracy and clarity by an external reviewer with 19 years of experience as a counselor educator. Participants were also asked to use their own words to describe their experience that would fit each category and were provided with an additional sheet of paper to expand upon their responses. The choices consisted of:

> a) Unplanned personal event, for example "I have personally experienced counseling related issues."
> b) Unplanned vicarious personal event, for example "I have a loved one who has experienced counseling related issues."
> c) Unplanned positive personal exposure to a professional counselor, for example "I received counseling services to address my own personal issues and this was a positive experience."
> d) Unplanned negative personal exposure to a professional counselor, for example "I received counseling services to address my own personal issues and this was a negative experience."
> e) Unplanned positive vicarious exposure to a professional counselor, for example "a loved one received counseling services to address his/her personal issues and this was a positive experience for him or her."
> f) Unplanned negative vicarious exposure to a professional counselor, for example "a loved one received counseling services to address his/her personal issues and this was a negative experience for him or her."
> g) Unplanned professional event, for example "I met a professional counselor who became my mentor."
> h) Planned professional event, for example "I have always wanted a career that would allow me to help others."
> i) Other

Participants were then asked to complete the Counselor Activity Self-Efficacy Scales. Participants returned the instruments to the university administrative staff who then returned them to the researcher. This procedure was followed over the course of three academic 9-week terms. Six instruments were collected during the first term of research, four instruments were collected during the second term, and three instruments were collected during the third term of the study.

Results

This study was designed to explore the connection between counselors-in-training's motivation for joining the counseling field and their perceived self-efficacy. Participants were grouped into categories contingent upon their response to an item on the background questionnaire, which asked them to select the primary influencing factor on their decision to join the counseling field. Mean scores for the participants in each category were then tabulated. A summary of the number of participants who selected each primary influencing factor is listed. The group's demographic make-up is also described based on age, ethnicity, and prior work experience in the counseling field. Each group's average score on the Counselor Activity Self-Efficacy Scales is reported. Finally, the participants' written accounts of their personal experiences with the primary influencing factor is reported. Participants' anonymity has been preserved with the use of

pseudonyms instead of actual names. The participants' comments have been edited for grammatical purposes, only, while preserving the overall voice and meaning of each participant's response.

Fifty-four percent (n=7) of the participants selected the "planned professional event" as the primary influencing factor on their decision to join the counseling field. Twenty-three percent (n=3) of the participants selected the "unplanned personal event" as the primary influencing factor on their decision to join the counseling field. Fifteen percent of the participants (n=2) selected the "other" category as the primary influencing factor on their decision to join the counseling field. Lastly, 8% (n=1) of the participants selected the "unplanned professional event" as the primary influencing factor on her or his decision to join the counseling profession. See Table 1 for a summary of the results.

Table 1
Results Summary

Event Type	Participant	Gender	Ethnicity	Age	Prior Experience	Average CASES Score by event type (Maximum = 369.00)
Planned professional event	Rhonda	Female	African American	31–35	0 years	
	Leslie	Female	African American	36–40	0 years	
	April	Female	Caucasian	36–40	9+ years	
	Norma	Female	African American	36–40	3–5 years	
	Sherry	Female	African American	26–30	3–5 years	
	Larry	Male	African American	41–45	0 years	
	Melissa	Female	African American	26–30	0 years	
						317.43
Unplanned personal event	Alicia	Female	African American	26–30	0–2 years	
	Nancy	Female	Caucasian	36–40	0 years	
	Tanya	Female	African American	26–30	0–2 years	
						292.00
Other	Sonya	Female	African American	26–30	0 years	
	Vicki	Female	African American	31–35	0–2 years	
						321.50
Unplanned professional event	Vivian	Female	African American	36–40	9+ years	253.00

"Planned professional event" (Example provided: I have always wanted a career that would allow me to help others.)

On average, participants who selected the "planned professional event" category scored higher on the Counselor Activity Self-Efficacy Scales (317.43 out of a total possible score of 369) than participants who chose the "unplanned personal event" and "unplanned professional event" categories. Rhonda is an African American female between the ages of 31–35 without any prior work experience in the counseling field. She described her personal experience as follows: "My initial career path was law but that had

more of a monetary benefit. I wanted a career that made a difference in someone's life, and I feel counseling does that the best." Leslie is an African American female between the ages of 36–40 without any prior work experience in the counseling field. She described her personal experience as follows: "I have always wanted to be a counselor." April is a Caucasian female between the ages of 36–40 with 9 or more years of work experience in the counseling field. She described her personal experience as follows:

> I began working a crisis hotline in my teens, was a social worker by age 22 and have been an addictions counselor for the past 13 years. Current billing practices have made it necessary for me to get a Masters Degree to continue to work in my field. This particular degree will allow me to expand my scope of practice.

Norma is an African American female between the ages of 36–40 with 3–5 years of work experience in the counseling field. She reported her personal experience as follows:

> I'm a very understanding person. I always help and encourage others in need. My goal was to work with young children with or without delinquency issues who are lost in the world. I also want to be a good leader and a role model for them. My main goal is to save the kids from drowning, meaning; if you could help them now at a young age, then you could help them from going down the wrong path. That is my main goal and mission, trying to make a difference.

Sherry is an African American female between the ages of 26–30 with 3–5 years of work experience in the counseling field. She described her personal experience as follows:

> Growing up in a small community, I have always wanted a job where I would be able to help others and also those individuals who have mental issues/disabilities. I wanted to be able to provide them with information. Also, by being a professional counselor, I am able to listen to others and help them to find solutions for their problems.

Larry is an African American male between the ages of 41–45 without any prior work experience in the counseling field. He described his personal experience as follows:

> Counseling has been a field that I wanted to be a part of since graduating college. The joy and satisfaction I get from assisting others with answering their own questions about life and resolving issues has solidified my decision to become a professional counselor; although I do understand that I may not be able to assist every person that I counsel.

Melissa is an African American female between the ages of 26–30 without any prior work experience in the counseling field. She reported her personal experience as follows: "I enjoy helping people and my friends always come to me for advice or for a listening ear. I would like to help rebuild family structures, one family at a time."

"Unplanned personal event" (Example provided: I have personally experienced counseling related issues.)

On average, participants who selected the "unplanned personal event" category scored lower on the Counselor Activity Self-Efficacy Scales (292.00 out of a total possible score of 369) than participants who chose the "planned professional event" and the "other" categories. Alicia is an African American female between the ages of 26–30

with 0–2 years of experience in the counseling field. She described her personal experience as follows: "I received counseling from the age of 9 to the age of 12. I was able with the help of a counselor, to move past a very difficult time in my life." Nancy is a Caucasian female between the ages of 36–40 without any prior work experience in the counseling field. She described her personal experience as follows: "I have personally experienced counseling related issues." Tanya is an African American female between the ages of 26–30 with 0–2 years of experience in the counseling field. She described her personal experience as follows: "Throughout life, I have had an interest with understanding the mind, emotion, psychological issues, and differences with individuals."

"Other"

On average, participants who selected the "other" category scored higher on the Counselor Activity Self-Efficacy Scales (321.50 out of a total possible score of 369) than participants who selected the "planned professional event," "unplanned personal event," and "unplanned professional event" categories. Sonya is an African American female between the ages of 26–30 with no prior work experience in the counseling field. She described her personal experience as follows:

> I am aware that there are many persons who suffer daily from mental illness. Mental illness is far more dangerous than some physical illness, because the person is not guaranteed to heal. My desire to become a counselor came from seeing so many helpless people suffer from mental illness, which can be referred to as bondage. As a counselor it is my role to make a difference in someone's life.

Vicki is an African American female between the ages of 31–35 with 0–2 years of experience in the counseling field. She described her personal experience as follows:

> I interned at Durant Children's Center for some years. My father is a pastor and I have always wanted to follow in his foot-steps with counseling. What pushed me further in this field is when I had my own personal experience and had to go through counseling from a genetic disease and having lost my child. If it wasn't for the guidance of my father and seeking professional help when I hit lows in life I wouldn't be here today, henceforth my decision to go into the counseling field.

"Unplanned professional event" (Example provided: I met a Professional Counselor who became my mentor.)

On average, the participant who selected the "unplanned professional event" category scored lower (253.00 out of a total possible score of 369) on the Counselor Activity Self-Efficacy Scales than the participants who selected the "other," "planned professional event," or "unplanned personal event" categories. Vivian is an African American female between the ages of 36–40 with 9 or more years of experience in the counseling field. She described her experience as follows: "In high school I became attached to the counselor because she tried to help everyone. After she pushed me to attend undergrad I knew one day I wanted to be a counselor."

Discussion

Based on the participants' written accounts, it appears that counselors-in-training who expressed an interest in helping others yielded a higher mean score on the Counselor Activity Self-Efficacy Scales than participants who selected a different option. This is evident not only in the mean score of participants within the "planned professional event" category, but also with a participant in the "other" category who expressed a desire to make a difference in someone's life. Interestingly, however, participants who selected the "unplanned personal event" category as the primary influencing factor on their decision to join the counseling profession scored lower than participants in both the "other" category as well as the "planned professional event" category. This finding possibly provides more support for the American Counseling Association's (2014) Gate-keeping and Remediation Ethical Code (F.6.b.), which requires counselor educators to assist counselors-in-training with assessing their readiness for direct client work. This concept works in tandem with the American Counseling Association's (2014) Ethical Code A.4.a., Avoiding Harm and Imposing Values. If counselor educators are able to help counselors-in-training recognize unresolved issues, then this could possibly reduce their likelihood of imposing harm upon their clients.

The participant who stated that an "unplanned professional event" was the primary influencing factor on her decision to join the counseling profession yielded the lowest mean score on the Counselor Activity Self-Efficacy Scale than participants who selected a different category. Traditionally, mentoring has been viewed as an imperative component of a counselor-in-training's tool kit. For instance, Warren (2005) attested that mentoring presents a rare opportunity for blossoming students to experience a positive lesson in values and ethics of the profession. Moreover, as early as 1987, Wright and Wright identified increased competence and self-esteem as two of the many benefits of a quality mentor relationship. However, the findings from this study create an added dimension worthy of further exploration as it relates to mentoring. The participant in this study who selected the "unplanned professional event" as the primary influencing factor on her decision to join the counseling field stated that she became attached to a counselor because she tried to help everyone. She went on to express that this counselor pushed her to attend undergraduate school, which solidified her career goal to become a counselor. This participant holds her first experience with a counselor in high regard; this raises the question of whether this participant measures her efficacy with clients based on how she feels her counselor effectively helped her. The participant could, therefore, be comparing herself to this counselor and striving to emulate her. However, if the student does not view herself as being equally effective in her role as a counselor, as she believes her counselor was with her, then this could be reflected in her lower average self-efficacy score. If this is the case, it could be wise to nurture mentor/mentee relationships in a way that encourages the mentee to receive direction from the mentor while also developing his/her own identity.

The goal of this study was to explore the connection between the influence on a counselor trainee's career decision and her/his level of self-efficacy. The results from the pool of participants in this study provide a framework for why it is that the factors that initially attracted a counselor trainee to the field could be just as important as her/his performance in the field, and possibly even affect her/his performance in the field. This

serves as a reminder for counselor educators to encourage counselor trainees to consider their motivation for joining the profession and how this could impact their ability to ethically and effectively work with clients.

Limitations and Further Research

A limitation of this study is the small sample size. Data was collected over the course of three academic terms to ensure that students were in the same phase of the program at the time that they participated in the study. A replication of this study should take place over a longer period of time in order to yield a larger sample size of participants. It would have also been beneficial to have the participants complete the survey online versus paper and pencil. This would expedite the summary and analysis process. A replication of this study should also include a more diverse group of participants based on ethnicity as well as gender. It may be beneficial to conduct actual interviews, which are audio-recorded, with participants. Personal interviews would also allow for follow-up questions and elaboration on responses. Finally, an extension of the present study could be to follow this same group of participants after graduation to assess their self-efficacy scores once they have had an opportunity to gain post-master's work experience.

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