Teaching Counseling Microskills Through the Use of Reflective Practice in Helping Professions

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Abstract

This study examined the use of reflective journaling in conjunction with role-playing as a tool for the development of microskills. Qualitative data were collected from graduate student trainees' (N = 22) reflective journals. Findings suggest that trainees describe the significant impact reflective practice has had on their self-efficacy, managing difficult emotions, recognizing the complexity of counseling skills, self-evaluation, and the importance of feedback. Implications for using reflective practice as a training tool in graduate-level counseling skill courses and future research are discussed.

Keywords

microskills, reflective journaling, feedback

One of the most researched topics in counselor development is teaching novice trainees in graduate programs how to conduct counseling successfully (Barrio Minton et al., 2011; 2018). Teaching these necessary skills requires students to move from learning and discussing theory to active practice (Connor & Leahy, 2016; Dollarhide et al., 2007; Ivey et al., 1968; Ivey & Daniels, 2016). Though many methods have been researched, the goal of training graduate students in the helping professions remains the same. To create effective practitioners who are capable of translating knowledge into practice and effectively use critical thinking and self-assessment to solve complex problems ethically while remaining present with their clients (Boswell & Castonguay, 2007; Skovholt & Jennings, 2005; Tannen et al., 2019). According to Dollarhide et al. (2007), this requires students to be able to translate didactic learning into schemas that inform how they "make sense of clients and the issues with which they present" (p. 243). Studies have shown that experiential learning techniques, like role-play, case studies, and modeling, are the best way to integrate classroom knowledge with practical skills (Dollarhide et al., 2007; Ivey et al., 1968; Levitt, 2001; Osborn & Costas, 2013; Whiston & Coker, 2000). This study aims to examine how reflective journaling after role-play assignments aids in developing microskills for graduate students in the helping professions.

Microskills

According to Hall et al. (2014), microskills are the primary pedagogy for counselor training. Microskills, also called microcounseling, were first developed by Ivey et al. (1968). Ivey et al. (1968) state that their goal was to "bridge the gap between classroom theory and actual practice" (p. 2). They did this by breaking down counseling into easily digested bite-sized chunks and having students practice one skill at a time. Research on microskills has continued along the same vein; while there have been developments in what are considered microskills, Barrio Minton

et al. (2011; 2018) found that research on counselor education and pedagogy has primarily focused on how to teach microskills.

Today, the most identified microskills include attending (Berven & Bezyak, 2015; Fyffe & Oei, 1979; Hall et al., 2014; Ivey et al., 1968), empathy (Hall et al., 2014; Kuntze et al., 2009; Whiston & Coker, 2000) minimal encouragers (Berven & Bezyak, 2015; Fyffe & Oei, 1979; Kuntze et al., 2009), questioning (Berven & Bezyak, 2015; Fyffe & Oei, 1979; Hall et al., 2014; Ivey & Daniels, 2016; Kuntze et al., 2009), reflection of feeling (Berven & Bezyak, 2015; Fyffe & Oei, 1979), and summarizing (Berven & Bezyak, 2015; Fyffe & Oei, 1979; Ivey & Daniels, 2016; Kuntze et al., 2009). Current research around microskills is mainly positive, supporting the premise that microskills training increases the therapeutic effectiveness of counseling students (Baker et al., 1984; Berven & Bezyak, 2015; Fyffe & Oei, 1979; Hall et al., 2014; Ivey et al., 1968; Ivey & Daniels, 2016; Kuntze et al., 2009; Levitt, 2001; Osborn & Costas, 2013).

Microskills are most often taught using a combination of theoretical instruction (Kuntze et al., 2009), modeling (Fyffe & Oei, 1979), practicing through role plays (Ivey et al., 1968; Ivey, Daniels, 2016; Osborn & Costas, 2013), feedback (peer or supervisor) (Fyffe & Oei, 1979; Ivey & Daniels, 2016), self-evaluation (Levitt, 2001), and group discussion (Ivey & Daniels, 2016). Role-playing is one of the most common methods for practicing microskills (Beck & Kulzer, 2018; Osborn & Costas, 2013).

Role-Play Training

In most role-plays, students are required to take turns being in the roles of client, counselor, and observer (Connor & Leahy, 2016; Ivey et al., 2010; Robinson & Cabianca, 1985). While role-plays are often students' first opportunity to move from theory to practice, they allow students to perform counseling and receive feedback in a relatively low-pressure environment (Osborn &

Costas, 2013). This low-pressure environment is vital to student learning as, according to Levitt (2001), "anxious attention to skills and performance creates less attention to the clients. Thus trainees become less effective listeners and counselors" (p. 102). Part of the role-play process for counselors is learning to manage their emotions during their time as counselors. This skill is often overlooked and is not likely to be practiced at any other time in their training. According to Grant (2006), this requires instructors to move beyond the didactic training and include more reflexive activities. Additionally, students are frequently asked to practice only a few microskills at a time, scaffolding those skills rather than attempting to incorporate all of them at once (Levitt, 2001). Levitt (2001) and Osborn and Costas (2013) found that students who were successful in their role-plays had increased confidence in their abilities lowering evaluation anxiety and increasing self-efficacy.

Furthermore, experiential practice is more effective at teaching microskills than solely didactic methods (Beck & Kulzer, 2018; Crowe, 2014; Shurts et al., 2006). For example, Boswell and Castonguay (2007) observed that students mistakenly believed that if a skill or technique were easy to understand in the classroom, it would be easy to implement. However, they noted that these students "quickly recognize the difficulty and complexity of utilizing these intervention strategies once in the therapy room with a client" (p. 381). However, critics of microskills research find that many approaches to microskills training do not adequately address the complexities of the counseling process (Miville et al., 2011; Robinson & Halliday, 1987; Warnath, 1979).

Tannen et al. (2019) state that microskills have overshadowed other, more complex abilities necessary in counselor preparation. Counseling students "have limited opportunities to establish a basis for making complex clinical judgments, which involves recognizing and attending to their own feelings, integrating their thoughts and feelings, and using this information to build

therapeutic relationships with clients" (Tannen et al., 2019; p. 406). Additionally, Jennings et al. (2003, 2005) and Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison (2011) found that two essential characteristics of successful counselors are their ability to practice reflection and self-assessment. Nutt (2011) states that microskills training is necessary and can be successful "if beginning-level microskills are particularly aimed at developing the counseling relationship" (p. 910). Similarly, research into common factors has shown that client success is often linked to a strong therapeutic relationship (Conner & Leahy, 2016; Nutt, 2011; Whinston & Coker, 2000). The therapeutic alliance is strong when counselors can be fully present with clients, skilled at self-reflection, and balance their expertise with the need to continue learning (Jennings et al., 2003). Research clearly shows that the ability to think critically about self and therapy is essential to creating successful client outcomes. Therefore, reflective practice must be integrated into microskills training.

Reflective Practice

Reflective thought can be traced back to Ancient Greece and Socrates (Taylor, 2020). More recently, educators began using reflective thinking to critically assess complex issues (Dewey, 1933; Mezirow, 1991; Rodgers, 2002). There are various definitions and uses of reflective thinking throughout the literature. Dewey (1933), Kolb (1984), Mezirow (1991), and Schön (1987) all created models of learning that included reflective thinking. They all believe that reflective thinking is central to the process of learning, growth, and development of effective professionals. Additionally, researchers view reflective thought and practice as central to professional growth, competence, and identity development (Albert & Carter, 2019; Hubbs & Brand, 2005; Kuit et al., 2001; Paula, 2003; Sutton et al., 2007; Taylor, 2020; Woodbridge & O'Beirne, 2017). While reflective practice takes many forms, one method frequently used in counselor education is reflective journaling.

Reflective journaling has been used in many contexts, including cultural competency (Ametrano et al., 2001; Kwong, 2020; Love et al., 2019), substance abuse treatment (Harrawood et al., 2011), ethics (Kimball & Daniel, 2020), and counselor identity development (Shuler et al, 2015; Storlie et al., 2017; Woodard & Lin, 1999; Woodbridge & O'Beirne, 2017). Hubbs and Brand (2005) found that reflective writing helps to bridge the gap between the inner and outer world, is a transformational process that highlights automatic thinking, and provides opportunities for deeper engagement with the self. Lamprecht and Pitre (2018) observed that journaling could be a neutral context for counseling students to process information, increase critical thinking, and further develop a counselor's identity. Woodbridge and O'Beirne (2017) found that the benefits of journaling include "the opportunity for emotional catharsis, a means for reaching a deeper level of empathy, and an opportunity to engage in self-reflection and track growth over time" (p. 228).

While this study is not intended to examine all the various definitions and uses of reflective practice, it is worthwhile to discuss Schön's (1987; 2017) two different forms of reflective practice for the framing of this study. The first form, reflection-in-action, relates to conscious thinking and modification through interactive reflection. An example of this is when a student trainee gets immediate feedback on avoiding asking too many close-ended questions and the need to validate the client's feelings more from supervisors or peers while conducting their practice sessions. Then, the trainee slows down, focuses on the reflection of feelings, and asks open-ended questions. As seen in this example, reflection-in-action refers to an active process where changes can still be made to affect the outcome rather than waiting until later to reflect on how things could be done differently.

On the other hand, reflection-on-action relates to reviewing, analyzing, and evaluating after the event has occurred (Munby, 1989). Reflection-on-action can be done by watching and

evaluating a taped session, journaling about a session, or discussing a session during individual or group supervision. Reflective writing is considered an example of reflection-on-action (Karnielli-Miller, 2020). In this concept, writing a journal entry on each practice session can allow the graduate student trainees to reflect on their experiences and gain new perspectives about their practice sessions. For example, trainees might explore how they felt and thought about immediate feedback or further explore what happened in the practice session.

The many benefits of reflective journaling have already been made clear in the research. However, the authors could find no research on reflective writing as a pedagogical tool for teaching microskills. This is surprising since many critics of microskills cite the lack of focus on more complex processes as one of the main problems with emphasizing microskills in counselor education. Research has shown that reflective journaling can increase counselors' ability to self-reflect. Therapists who are skilled at self-reflection have increased empathy, self-esteem, confidence, work-life balance, and lower feelings of distress, guilt, burnout, and shame (Jorieman et al., 2002; Taylor 2020), which leads to improved client outcomes (Cologon et al., 2017; Taylor, 2020). Therefore, using reflective journaling in conjunction with role-playing could provide a window into the internal processes of counseling students. It can also highlight trainees' abilities to critically reflect on their skills, the process of therapy, and their strengths and weaknesses as practitioners. Therefore, this study will focus specifically on how the process of reflective practice (role-plays and reflective journaling) can aid in the development of microskills and the acquisition of more complex skills needed to build strong therapeutic alliances.

The Current Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to describe the impact of reflective practice on the development of microskills among graduate student trainees in the helping professions. The

following research questions guided our investigation: (1) How does reflective practice enhance microskills training for students who were enrolled in the Techniques of Counseling & Psychotherapy course? and (2) How do students who conducted counseling role-play sessions perceive the instructional training value of reflective practice?

Method

The present study utilized a qualitative content analysis as a methodological approach to explore participants' experiences as recorded in reflection journals (Cho & Lee, 2014; Krippendorff, 2013; Schreier, 2012). We chose a conventional content analysis as this approach provides a flexible framework for deriving coding categories directly from the text data and interpreting the meaning of text data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). We used an inductive approach to determine key themes. This involved coding all the data before identifying and reviewing each key theme. Each theme was examined to gain an understanding of student trainees' perceived experiences of counseling role-play sessions and the impact of reflective practice on microskills training.

Participants and Procedures

The study consisted of 22 participants. The only inclusion criteria for participants were to complete a required Techniques of Counseling & Psychotherapy course. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling. After obtaining institutional review board approval and grades have been submitted, the faculty researcher invited students to give their consent for their reflection journals to be used in this study. Students who completed the course received an email invitation to participate in this research study. Only the work products of those students who permitted their data were used in this study. Students who gave their consent for the use of their reflective journals were also asked to complete a short demographics questionnaire, which

included items such as program of study, age, gender, and ethnicity. Then, students' reflection papers were downloaded to a passport-secured computer, and the faculty researcher removed each student's name from their paper and gave specific numbers for each student's paper. The final sample of 22 participants (20 identified as female, 2 as male) ranged in ages from 22 to 36, with 20 participants in their 20s and 2 in their 30s. Of the sample, 17 students identified as European American/Caucasian, one as Black or African American, one as American Indian or Alaska Native, and one as mixed race. While 12 students were from the Clinical Psychology program, five students were from the School Counseling program, and five students were from the School Psychology program.

The study was conducted in the Techniques of Counseling & Psychotherapy course. The goal of the course was to provide trainees with the skills necessary to begin a counseling or psychology practicum, and opportunities to practice counseling techniques through role-play sessions. The course comprised an experiential component that was designed for the counselor trainees to practice basic counseling skills (e.g., attending and influencing skills) and weekly reflection journals. For class lectures, graduate student trainees were introduced to microskills (e.g., attending and influencing skills) from Cormier et al.'s (2018) text. Microskills were practiced through role plays throughout the semester. These role-play sessions involved three students who play different roles (counselor, client, observer) at each practice session. Each session emphasizes different microskills. After each practice session, counselor trainees had a supervision session which typically started with the question "So, how did it go". In order to provide specific feedback, the student supervisor used the rating form provided by the instructor of the course. The feedback form included specific items that were geared toward facilitating the development of counseling skills that would increase the therapeutic alliance and demonstrate basic counseling skills (the

supervision feedback form is available upon request from the first author). In addition to the supervision session, the instructor either joined a live or Zoom session, listened in, and gave feedback immediately during/after each student's session.

After the supervision session, students were also asked to write a journal entry for each counseling practice session. Students' journal entries included a brief description of the counseling session, the skills they demonstrated, their reflections on the experience, and skills needing practice based on the feedback they received. Students reflected on their role-play experience and the feedback they received from their peers and the course instructor.

Researchers

When the primary instrument for data collection and analysis is the researcher, providing information about their background is important. The research team consisted of the lead researcher and four research assistants who are in the field of counseling and clinical psychology from two different institutions. The lead researcher is the course instructor who identifies himself as a counselor educator and has been teaching the course for over three years. There were two research teams in this study. The initial team consisted of the lead researcher and two research assistants (fourth and fifth authors). The initial team received the IRB, formulated research questions, conducted initial coding, and developed initial theme categorization. Unfortunately, external factors, the lead researcher (course instructor) transitioning jobs, impeded the progress of data analysis.

With the permission of the first team, a new research team has been established consisting of two additional research assistants (second and third authors) in the lead researcher's new institution. The second author, identified as queer and white, is a doctoral candidate in Counselor Education & Supervision who took an active role in the literature review, data analysis, and

primary coding team. The third author, who identified as a white woman, is a master's level student in a CACREP-accredited Clinical Mental Health Counseling Program and also helped with the data analysis process. The fourth author, who is bilingual and comes from a diverse background, and the fifth research author, who identified as a white woman, were also research assistants who conducted initial coding and developed theme categorization. Researchers genuinely engaged in conversations about potential biases during the coding and data analysis process.

Data Analysis

The reflection journals written by the graduate student trainees were collected and examined using qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012). More specifically, we followed Creswell's (2013) five steps of data analysis to analyze the data collected for this study. These steps include organizing and preparing the data, reading all the data, starting to make initial codes, using the coding process to generate themes, and interpreting data meaning. In working to organize the data, the lead researcher downloaded each student's reflection journals and merged them into a one-word file for each participant. Then, the first research team independently read all the reflection journals to jot down thoughts and memos about potential codes to create. The second research team also developed an initial list of codes. Then, these initial codes were sorted into potential themes by both research teams. Next, the entire team of researchers met to merge and/or modify themes. While similar themes were merged, other themes that did not have enough data to back them up were removed. The key themes were ordered based on the frequency of counts.

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Findings

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The data collected in this study resulted in five overall themes, including emotional experiences, self-efficacy, challenges and complexities of the counseling process and skills, feedback, and self-

evaluation of microskills. The common themes reported in the findings are also supported by direct quotes from participants.

Theme 1: Emotional Experiences

The majority of graduate student trainees described various emotions (anxiety, nervousness, and discomfort) they experienced before/during their role-play session. Trainees high level of emotional awareness manifested as nervousness or fear for the first role-play session. This was shared by a trainee as follows, "I was very nervous, as this is obviously something very new to me." Another trainee described a similar emotional experience by stating, "I was a little nervous about the smaller details of how it would go."

Trainees' nerves and anxiousness from the beginning of the session played a role in their ability to be present with their clients. Their nervousness was frequently related to worrying about doing or saying the right thing during the sessions. In this concept, several students expressed that they were so hyper-focused on thinking about what to say next, that they felt like they were not able to fully listen and provide their undivided attention to their client. One trainee stated, "I think my nerves had me disengaged and I would worry about what to say next rather than giving time to really reflect on what my client is saying." In general, trainees felt so nervous that they were unable to truly be present with their clients.

While the majority of trainees explained that their anxiety subsided as they engaged in more role-play sessions, some trainees explained that they felt more anxious or nervous because of the adding new skills each week. For example, one trainee stated, "In the second session, I was less nervous and more confident in my role as a counselor." Another trainee shared a similar experience as follows, "I felt more comfortable and felt as if I did a better job paraphrasing and clarifying what the client was telling me." Some trainees described their anxiety increased as they

were asked to blend the various microskills each week. For example, one trainee stated that "Surprisingly, I felt more nervous than ever before. I think that adding new skills is giving me a lot of checkboxes that I feel like I need to check off."

Theme 2: Self-efficacy

Another important factor that influenced student trainees' performance is perceived self-efficacy, which encompasses their confidence in their own capabilities and competencies (Bandura, 1977). For our analysis, self-efficacy and self-confidence are used interchangeably as we collated them into a theme called the perception of self-efficacy. The majority of trainees consistently discussed their self-efficacy in their reflection journals. It was evident that their overall confidence increased as they engaged in more role-play sessions. For example, one trainee stated that "In this session, I felt better about blending the various techniques we had used in previous sessions." Another trainee explained, "I can feel myself making progress and becoming more and more comfortable using these skills, especially the basic ones that we have been using for weeks."

While some trainees talked about their confidence in general, others discussed their confidence based on specific counseling skills. One trainee explained, "My ability to reflect feelings and summarization continue to improve and I could tell growth in my confidence even in the short time from the first session." After practicing each week, many trainees started to feel more confident in the counseling role, as shared by one trainee who stated, "I feel my confidence and comfort increasing each week as we have more sessions." Through practice and repetition, student trainees' confidence started to gradually progress.

Theme 3: Challenges and Complexities of the Counseling Process and Skills

Many student trainees recognized both the difficulties of utilizing microskills and the complexity of the counseling process. Several student trainees acknowledged various challenging situations they might face in their future practice. For example, one trainee mentioned the difficulty of working with a resistant or difficult client as follows, "I understand that not everyone wants to be helped or it might be very difficult for certain populations of people to show up to therapy." Another challenging situation was setting boundaries with the client as explained the following way, "Sometimes it may be difficult to enforce boundaries in fear of hurting other's feelings, but this course has taught and prepared me for situations as such." Another trainee focused on transference issues as follows, "My client told me that I reminded her of her mother. I think this could be a very uncomfortable and tricky topic that might arise during counseling." These are only a few examples of student trainees' recognition of complex issues they may face in their future practice.

Many student trainees also acknowledged the challenges they face in utilizing microskills. For example, when explaining the first experience of intentionally using microskill in a role-play session, one trainee documented, "This is one of the most difficult things for me to do in a therapeutic setting because it is very different from how an everyday conversation takes place." Several students described their difficulties with silence in their role-play sessions. For example, one trainee stated, "I need to work on being comfortable in the silence of a session and allowing myself to process, along with the client." Similarly, another trainee stated, "I need to become more comfortable in the silence, when appropriate, to allow my client to get to the deepest part of their thoughts."

Theme 4: Feedback

Another particular theme that emerged from reflection journals was the feedback they received from both peers and the course instructor. One trainee stated, "The feedback that we received either from peers or the professor was a huge part of me growing as a mental health professional." The majority of student trainees explained that receiving continuous and immediate feedback was extremely beneficial for their growth. In this concept, one trainee explained, "Some factors about this course experience that have fostered my growth as a mental health professional are that I got instantaneous feedback on my sessions and was able to write those down and work on those throughout the week in my everyday conversations." Similarly, another student explained the value of immediate feedback as follows, "It has been a safe place to practice, build and observe techniques while being provided with immediate feedback."

Several student trainees mentioned the importance of receiving positive and constructive feedback in a safe environment. This was reflected in a trainee's reflection journal as follows, "Throughout all of our feedback sessions, I never once felt attacked or made fun of for doing something wrong. Instead, the learning environment created was one of honesty and openness, much like the counseling relationship." The importance of receiving constructive feedback was highlighted in another trainee's reflection journal as follows, "I was able to get great feedback from my classmates and professor. After hearing their feedback, I watched my session over again to help myself connect what they said with what I did. In regard to nonverbals, I need to work on using more gestures." Another trainee explained the benefits of positive feedback as follows, "The live sessions only made me a better counselor. My peers and professor instilled hope, new techniques, and confidence into me."

Theme 5: Self-evaluation

Self-evaluation was another particular theme that emerged from student trainees' reflection journals. Reflecting on their microskills development, almost every trainee evaluated their performance, including strengths, weaknesses, and areas to focus on for microskills development. For example, one trainee stated, "In the last two sessions, I have offered advice instead of giving information. Both of the advice pieces could have been re-worded to being information-giving, so I need to work on rewording things and making sure I am expressing it the way I want to and that is appropriate." Another trainee mentioned, "I could have done a better job validating her concerns. I was perceiving her situation as valid and understandable in my head, but I would like to communicate that more through verbal or nonverbal cues."

Several trainees discussed how watching and evaluating their recorded sessions helped them to gain a new perspective on their microskill development. For example, one trainee stated, "Watching my session back, I realize I need to practice clarification without asking a close-ended question afterward." Another trainee acknowledged the importance of using effective body language by stating, "While re-watching the video, I noticed a lot of movement on my part, in the chair. I believe it from nerves, but nevertheless, it was distracting and seemed insensitive to the scenario."

While evaluating their microskills development, several trainees discussed their plans to improve their microskills. For example, one trainee stated, "One thing I would like to focus more on during the next session would be the use of immediacy in the relationship. Using immediacy would not only help me stay in the present moment with the client but would also show them that I am focused and attentive to what they are saying." Another trainee stated, "I would also like to alter the way in which I provided the client with a goal at the end of the session. I think that I would like for it to sound less like homework and more toward something to discuss as a team

looking ahead to our next meeting." In summary, trainees continuously engaged in self-evaluation to improve and refine their skills.

Discussion

This qualitative study explored how the process of reflective practice facilitates the development of microskills in master's level student trainees. Although the extant literature within the field of counseling has examined the role of reflective practice in various contexts (Ametrano et al., 2001; Kimball & Daniel, 2020; Kwong, 2020; Shuler et al, 2015; Storlie et al., 2017; Woodard & Lin, 1999; Woodbridge & O'Beirne, 2017), no research to date has examined the use of reflective journaling in conjunction with role-playing as a tool for the development of microskills. Thus, this study serves to address gaps in the literature by offering an understanding of how reflective practice may foster growth in counselor trainees' microskill development.

The content analysis results indicated reflective practice, more specifically role-play sessions and reflective journals, helps student trainees increase their self-efficacy. Consistent with the general conclusion of Levitt (2001) and Osborn and Costas (2013), the finding of the present study showed that role-play sessions help student trainees lower their anxiety and increase self-efficacy. Although self-efficacy is related to beliefs about certain skills, not actual performance, it can also produce a better counseling skill performance (Levitt, 2001). Therefore, we expected this experience might have fostered better counseling skill performance.

Another important finding was the emergence of intense emotional experiences before or during role-play sessions as having a profound effect on trainees. This finding seems to provide additional support for Levitt's (2001) study, which stated that when trainees anxiously manage their use of microskills, they listen less effectively and fail to focus on the client. Part of the role-play sessions for student trainees is learning to manage their emotions during their time as

counselors. Unfortunately, this skill is often overlooked and is not likely to be practiced at any other time in their training. Trainees' anxiety surrounding the use of newly acquired microskills can negatively impact their microskill development and their overall self-efficacy (Gockel et al., 2013). Therefore, it is crucial to help trainees navigate their own feelings so they can engage with clients effectively. One way to do this is through reflective practice. In this concept, "training needs to move beyond the didactic" and include more "reflexivity" (Grant, 2006, p. 219).

One of the most interesting findings from this study relates to the trainees' acknowledging the complexities of the counseling process and skills. This finding is contrary to previous studies which have suggested that microskill training does not adequately address the complexities of the counseling process (Miville et al., 2011; Robinson & Halliday, 1987). Although it is beyond the scope of this study to explore complex counseling issues, it is valuable to describe the effect of engaging in such challenging role-plays on the trainees' experience. Moreover, trainees are often preoccupied with specific skills, not with complex client presentations (see Grant, 2006). By working with difficult and complex issues, they "quickly recognize the difficulty and complexity of utilizing these intervention strategies once in the therapy room with a client" (Boswell & Castonguay, 2007; p. 381). This finding has important implications for preparing trainees to recognize and work effectively with complex client issues.

Our findings also highlight the importance of feedback in the development of microskills. Consistent with previous findings (Barnett et al., 2007; Chur-Hansen & McLean, 2006; Daniels & Larson, 2011; Osborn & Costas, 2013), findings showed that positive feedback from both the instructor and peers can be a crucial factor in managing intense emotions (e.g., anxiety and nervousness) and reducing the anxiety surrounding the use of newly acquired micro-skills. This suggests that receiving immediate, continuous, and positive feedback can be a critical part of

developing self-efficacy and micro skills. This finding reflects those of Daniels and Larson (2011) who also found that positive feedback is a causal factor in the development of self-efficacy. In addition to positive feedback, it is not surprising that trainees reflected on their strengths and weaknesses in the development of micro-skills. This is an important finding because the ability to practice reflection and self-assessment is considered an essential characteristic of counselors (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2011). Trainees' desire to engage in self-evaluation may be influenced by various factors such as feedback and reflective journaling. Overall, using reflective journaling in conjunction with role-play sessions in training yielded several important findings in this study.

Limitations

Although the findings of this study provided a contextual understanding of how reflective practice may foster growth in counselor trainees' microskill development, it is not without limitations. The present study utilized a convenience sampling procedure, recruiting master's level trainees from three sections (summer 2020, spring, 2021, and summer 2021) of a course at a midwestern university. Although the final sample size in this study was sufficient (see Braun & Clarke, 2016; Fugard & Potts, 2015), only 22 master's level trainees out of 40 participated in this study. First, the participants' experiences could be different from that of their peers who did not attend the study. Also, participants were enrolled in three different programs (School Counseling, School Psychology, and Clinical Psychology), so the findings can not be generalized to any of these degree programs or explained in the context of these programs. One should refrain from generalizing the study's findings across other trainees attending other universities and/or use the findings to explain the experiences of all trainees. Lastly, the majority of participants were female

and white. Therefore, the results do not fully capture the overall experiences of trainees across different gender and ethnicity.

Although student trainees were invited to voluntarily participate in the study after they completed the semester, the voluntary nature of participants may also be problematic since the participants were the student trainees of the principal investigator. It is also possible that participants' willingness to attend the study might be related to their high motivation and positive experience in the course, which might be different from others who did not participate in the study. Despite such limitations, this study offers important insight into the use of reflective practice as a training instrument to teach microskills to trainees in the helping professions.

Conclusions

Microskills training has become central to helping professions. All graduate students in the helping professions must have the basic skills necessary to connect and enhance their communication with their clients. Studies have shown that various methods (e.g., theoretical instruction, role-plays, group discussions) have been used to practice microskills in training programs. In the present study, we examined how reflective journaling in conjunction with role-play sessions aids in the development of microskills among graduate student trainees. Consistent with other studies (Grant, 2006; Ivey & Daniels, 2016; Levitt, 2001; Osborn & Costas, 2013), the qualitative findings of this study reveal the importance of managing difficult/intense emotions (e.g., anxiety), increasing counseling self-efficacy, recognizing the challenges and complexity of the counseling process and skills, and engaging with self-evaluation. The findings also stressed the importance of receiving positive, immediate, and continuous feedback, which is considered an ethical imperative for supervisors (ACA, 2014).

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