COUNSELOR SELF-EFFICACY: THE EFFECTS OF ONLINE PREPARATORY COUNSELING PROGRAMS

By

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ABSTRACT

The delivery of counseling services online is increasing at a rapid rate. This increase in online delivery is concerning due to the ethical obligation for preparatory courses to ensure that counseling programs are providing resources to ensure the development of self-efficacy in addition to skill development among counselors-in-training for practice in an increasing online world. The development of counseling skills is very specific and requires applying learned techniques to real life situations. This study utilized data collected from counselors currently in practice concerning their perception of the effects of online counseling services on student self-efficacy. Professional counselors, with graduate level degrees in counseling, involved in private practice, and practicing in K-12 educational settings served as the sample for this study. The results focused on the relationship between self-efficacy and technology. The results and implications of the study will be shared along with connections to current literature in academia and application to counseling practice.

Keywords: Self-efficacy, Online Counseling, Technology.

INTRODUCTION

Counseling itself is at a technological crossroads as counseling services are increasingly offered via web-based media. As online counseling services increase in popularity and relevance it follows that there is a need to examine counselor self-efficacy in terms of online counseling (Andersson et al., 2014).

To assure that counseling and offered services do not suffer due to a shift towards online counseling, counselors must ensure that the same empathy and self-efficacy that are necessarily developed and applicable in counseling practice is equally developed and central to online counseling services (Ponton, 2009). Additionally, as online counseling increases in acceptance there is an obligation for counselors to keep professional identity and ethics a key focus for all mental health services regardless of delivery method.

Researchers in the field of counselor development and counseling self-efficacy point to the difficulty of raising counselor awareness and self-efficacy without students having first hand practical experience and correction (Watson, 2012). With less structured opportunities for traditional practicum in the realm of online counseling, the question of developing self-efficacy without the use of traditional counselor development practices raises concerns. Counseling students are often left without the opportunity to apply concepts through practical experiences in the realm of web-mediated counseling (Watson, 2012).

In terms of the shift towards online counseling methods, graduate programs must focus on developing general counseling skills necessary for practice as well as the micro-skills that are important for online service delivery which must include practicum during which counseling students may apply theory and utilize skills while under supervision (CACREP, 2016) both Face-to-Face (FTF) and

via web-mediated online delivery methods.

As the general population increasingly becomes more accustomed to online services than previous generations, the delivery of online mental health services becomes a foregone conclusion necessary for equality of access. The need for mental health services in rural areas, increasing popularity of online delivery in general, and positive results for clients currently utilizing online mental health services will only increase demand for on-line counseling, perhaps to a point where it may be an equally viable option to traditional face-to-face counseling (Dollarhide et al., 2013). The counseling field is on the verge of revolution as online web-mediated services become a highly accepted reality. Therefore, counseling students must be properly trained and ready to work with clients who are not only more accepting of online services, but also expecting it as an option in general.

Currently, the field of counselor preparatory education is faced with adopting an equitable preparatory curriculum that will adequately prepare counseling students for practice and build the necessary self-efficacy in online counseling. The purpose of this research was to examine practicing counselor self-efficacy in online counseling.

1. Literature Review

Graduate level instruction for the clinical professions such as counseling, in the modern world offers educators and preparatory programs a specific conundrum. To remain competitive, offer equitable options, and serve students, counselor training programs must adapt to distance service delivery including online counseling. However, counseling has a very specific personal and high touch nature whose learned techniques must be applied in a real-world environment which is incorporating technology at a rapid rate (Watson, 2012).

The proliferation of online counseling adds new concerns to those traditionally associated with counseling. Beyond concerns about equity, efficacy, and achievement, counselor educators are seen to have an ethical obligation to ensure that their students are entering the profession with an adequate and realistic sense of their abilities and skill level so that they do not cause harm to the individuals they will serve (Watson, 2012). These concerns are of importance to counselor educators and graduate counselor programs as they seek to make more course work available to prepare students for the delivery of online counseling services.

Graduate counseling education programs are designed to help students develop counseling skills either via course work or the practicum and internship experience which is complicated when developing curriculum for online counseling. These general counseling skills, include summarizing, paraphrasing, empathy, reflecting, and encouraging. These skills are the foundation of effective counseling (Meyer, 2014). According to Ivey et al. (2010), counselor education programs must also develop counseling micro-skills which include ethics and competence, observing clients, attending, summarizing and paraphrasing, using questions, encouraging, clarifying, directing the focus of discussion, reflecting meaning and feeling, and integrating skills. These skills are the universal basis for counseling professions (Meyer, 2014).

Counseling self-efficacy has been described as a person's beliefs in his or her capability to effectively counsel (Larson & Daniels, 1998). It has been suggested that increasing prospective counselors' counseling self-efficacy is a worthwhile training goal as it shares a positive relationship with counseling skill level (Meyer, 2014). Counseling self-efficacy is composed of five facets which include (a) awareness of self-values, (b) developing an awareness of the process, (c) developing cultural competence, (d) performance of micro skills, and (e) working with challenging clients (Meyer, 2014).

As technology advances, so do the possibilities and opportunities offered by online counseling. Web-mediated counseling services, although still facing some barriers related to access and technical knowledge, has developed new methods of delivery. Through audio and video sharing technology, counselors may leverage real-time interactions (Benshoff & Gibbons, 2011).

In a study examining the perceived counseling self-

efficacy of students who had taken their core skill development course online, online students reported higher levels of counseling self-efficacy when controlling for past counseling experience (Watson, 2012).

Numerous aspects of graduate counselor education including classroom discussions, modeling, supervision, and hands-on experiences associated with practicum and internships have been found to help improve counseling self-efficacy perceptions which are closely linked with aspects traditionally thought only to be available through FTF counseling service delivery (Larson & Daniels, 1998). In terms of counseling, activities critical to the development of counseling self-efficacy including those which incorporate task performance and vicarious learning are commonly seen as best served in the FTF setting. Additionally, FTF offers students the opportunity to experience actual performance, supervision, and anxiety which are also factors related to skill development and are related to counseling self-efficacy development (Meyer, 2014). Past research has shown that counseling practice and feedback on practice, such as those offered through FTF counseling instruction have an impact on counseling self-efficacy.

As counseling self-efficacy is essential to the development of effective and appropriate counselors, it is imperative to examine the ability of education instructional methods to develop a strong sense of online counseling self-efficacy amongst its students. Additionally, there is a need for appropriate supervision and guidance during the acquisition of general and online micro-counseling skills (Meyer, 2014). Providing both supervision and guidance offers developmental and technical challenges which are exacerbated by distance service delivery formatting. However, students reported almost no difference in quality of supervision in online and FTF formats (Nelson et al., 2010). In the same vein, students cite the importance of technology training and tech support as being a key component to their comfort with online delivery (Benshoff & Gibbons, 2011).

For researchers seeking to examine the efficacy of the online counseling, the complex and unique nature of developing effective and appropriate online counselors presents unique challenges for exploring the ability of courses to help prospective counselors develop the necessary skills and techniques. According to Watson (2012), students who attempt to judge their own counseling self-efficacy may fall victim to a natural tendency for individuals to overrate their abilities in the absence of a specific skill demonstration such as a setting where there is practice and correction.

Counseling self-efficacy has been measured by numerous studies through utilization of the Counseling Self Estimate Inventory (COSE) (Watson, 2012; Meyer, 2014). The COSE is based on Bandura's theory of social learning as it relates to self-efficacy. According to Larson and Daniels (1998), there are four instructional modes that affect counseling self-efficacy (a) education on the skill, (b) instructor modeling of the skill, (c) successful practice of a skill, and (d) processing emotional reactions to the skill. Successful practice of a behavior was determined to be the most powerful predictor of increased counseling self-efficacy. Through the skill training component of graduate counseling education programs, students are exposed to all four instructional modes with a repeated focus on actual practice of counseling skills (Meyer, 2014). Graduate counseling education programs must incorporate the five facets of counseling self-efficacy along with the four instructional modalities noted to increase counseling self-efficacy.

2. Methods

2.1 Instrumentation

2.1.1 Demographic Information

The demographic portion of the survey included fourteen-items covering general demographic information, such as years of experience, gender, age, and race/ethnicity.

2.1.2 School Guidance Counselors' Perceptions of Online Counseling Survey

The School Guidance Counselors' Perceptions of Online Counseling Survey (Glasheen et al., 2013) is a 38–item scale divided into 7 sections. Section 1: Counselors' personal experience of technological use, Section 2:

Counselors' beliefs about online technology in general, Section 3: Counselors' perceptions of student use of technology, Section 4: Counselors' intention to use online counseling, Section 5: Counselors' confidence to use online counseling, Section 6: Counselors' perceptions of student acceptability of online counseling, and Section 7: Demographics. The authors noted that there was no need to request permission to use the scale and permission was not requested (Glasheen et al., 2013). The sections used for this study were sections 4 and 5. Section 4 consist of 4 questions of which one question was used to measure self-efficacy. The statement states, "I have the required technical skills to provide online counseling in my school". Section 5 consists of 7 statements. Six out of seven statements were used to measure self-efficacy in this study. The statements used are as follows, "I understand the legal issues related to online counseling;" "I am available for online counseling;" "I can successfully control the online counseling process;" "I can integrate face-to-face counseling with online counseling;" "I am able to ensure confidentiality when using online counseling;" and "I understand the ethical implications of online counseling".

In determining validity, six of the seven questions in Section 5 of the original survey were utilized. Five of these six items had high factor loadings: "I understand the legal issues related to online counseling" (.787); "I am available for online counseling" (.852); "I can successfully control the online counseling process" (.776); "I can integrate face-to-face counseling with online counseling" (.673); and "I am able to ensure confidentiality when using online counseling" (.838). It appeared that "I understand the ethical implications of online counseling" did not load, but the question that was added for this survey did load, the Section 4 statement, "I have the required technical skills to provide online counseling in my school" (.662). Concerning reliability, the Cronbach alpha of the original Section 5, Counselors' confidence to use online counseling was 0.89. Cronbach's alpha for the section in the present survey, self-efficacy in online counseling was 0.95.

2.2 Data Collection

The participants (N=148) in this study were identified as counselors and counselor educators from three different national sources. Participants, with permission from each source, were accessed through the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), American Counseling Association (ACA), and the Counselor Education and Supervision Network Listserve (CESNET-L).

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics suggest that, overall, the counselors surveyed believe they have the required technical skills to provide online counseling (M = 4.75) and understand the ethical implications of online counseling (M = 4.82), but are not totally convinced that they can successfully control the online counseling process (M = 4.03) and are not available for online counseling (M = 3.88) (Table 1).

In comparing the use of technology with self-efficacy, the inverse relationship existed at the highest level of use of technology, but at the lowest level of technology, the authors have also found the lowest level of self-efficacy. The perception of self-efficacy was at its highest when the use of technology was at mid-range (Table 2).

3.2 Multiple Regression

Multiple regression was conducted to determine the best linear combination of age, years of experience working as a professional counselor, graduate from a Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational

Self-Efficacy	N	Mean	Median	SD
I have the required technical skills to provide online counseling in my school	142	4.75	5.00	1.842
I understand the legal issues related to online counseling	142	4.61	5.00	1.875
I am available for online counseling	141	3.88	4.00	2.328
I can successfully control the online counseling process	140	4.03	4.00	2.192
I can integrate face-to-face counseling with online counseling	142	4.58	5.00	1.884
I am able to ensure confidentiality when using online counseling	141	4.25	4.00	2.118
I understand the ethical implications of online counseling	141	4.82	5.00	1.782

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Self-Efficacy

	Use of Technology			
Self-Efficacy	1	2	3	Total
N	44	44	50	138
Mean	30.36	32.86	29.7000	30.92
Median	29.50	30.00	26.00	29.00
Std. Deviation	11.52	12.08	13.27765	12.34

Table 2. Comparing use of Technology with Self-Efficacy

Programs (CACREP) certified program, and use of technology for predicting counselor's beliefs about the value of self-efficacy in online counseling in a school setting (Assumptions of linearity, normally distributed errors, and uncorrelated errors were checked and met). The means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations can be found in Table 3. The combination of variables significantly predicted self-efficacy, $F(4, 133) = 4.14$, $p = .003$, with two of the four variables, years of experience working as a professional counselor and use of technology, significantly contributing to the prediction. The adjusted R square value was .08. This indicates that

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
Self-Efficacy	18.85	12.72	.10	.01**	.07	.02**
Predictor Variables						
1. Age	38.70	10.16		.00**	.00**	.00**
2. Work Experience	6.92	6.60			.12	.00**
3. CACREP	1.61	.83				.42
4. Use of Technology	2.04	.83				

**Designates Significance

Table 3. Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations for Self-Efficacy and Predictor Variables (N = 138)

Variable	B	SEB	ß
1. Age	.06	.13	.05
2. Work Experience	.45	.19	.23
3. CACREP	-1.45	1.29	-.10
4. Use of Technology	-4.00	1.36	-.26
Constant	23.94	5.45	

Counselor's Self-Efficacy in Online Counseling = 23.94 + .06 (Age) + .45 (Work Experience) – 1.45 (CACREP) – 4.0 (Use of Technology)

Table 4. Simultaneous Multiple Regression Analysis Summary Age, Years of Experience Working as a Professional Counselor, Graduate from a CACREP Certified Program, and Use of Technology for Predicting Counselor's Self-Efficacy in Online Counseling

8% of the variance in self-efficacy was explained by the model. According to Cohen (1988), this is a medium effect. The beta weights presented in Table 4 suggest that use of technology contributes most to self-efficacy in online counseling while years of experience working as a professional counselor also contributes to this prediction.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to examine practicing counselor self-efficacy in online counseling. The counselors surveyed believe they have the required technical skills to provide online counseling (M = 4.75) and understand the ethical implications of online counseling (M = 4.82). However, counselor fears about the online counseling process are still relevant as noted by results which state that the surveyed counselors are not totally convinced that they can successfully control the online counseling process (M = 4.03) and are, perhaps as a consequence, not available for online counseling. Similar findings have been reported by Hennigan and Goss (2016) who reported that intent to participate in online counseling is highly linked to perceived practical and ethical challenges. Familiarity with the ethical challenges associated with counseling may contribute to reluctance to use online counseling as noted by the results that years of experience working as a professional counselor significantly contributing to the likelihood of participating in online counseling.

Familiarity with the practicalities of asynchronous communication such as in online coursework, including technical issues, delays, and privacy may also play a role in results which suggest that increased familiarity with technology decreases a counselor's comfort level with online counseling.

Recommendations for Research and Practice

The results of this study displayed that the counselors surveyed believe they have the required technical skills to provide online counseling and understand the ethical implications of online counseling. The result of this study are promising as online education is growing and becoming more common for universities to incorporate within their counseling programs. Helping graduate

students understand asynchronous communication, such as in online coursework, technical and privacy issues, delays, and ethical concerns early in a counseling program can help increase students' self-efficacy in using online counseling. For researchers looking to explore and to increase knowledge in online education, one should look at areas, such as course content as another way to measure student self-efficacy (Watson, 2012). Students must be given online course work that is relevant to future practice. Students need to be able to have practiced and participated in online counseling strategies so that they are familiar with the ethical challenges and how to deal with issues as they arise. Online counseling can also start with synchronous communications. Students first need to find a comfort level with synchronous communications before they go to asynchronous communications thereby increasing a counselor's familiarity and comfort level. Future research must examine specific communication: synchronous and asynchronous online communication. The research needs to determine how much teaching and practice the counselor has had in online counseling intervention skills, their knowledge and use of these skills, and their self-efficacy of these skills.

A look at student's experiences within the field of counseling before entering an online program could be beneficial for researchers in finding information related to levels of self-efficacy. Completing an online course, program, or having technological experience prior can play a big role in increasing a student's self-efficacy when using online counseling as a source when helping clients.

As online counseling programs are growing, counselors, counselor educators, and graduate students are urged to consider both the positive and negatives of using an online format when helping clients. The effectiveness of an online education format must continue to be evaluated in order to provide the proper tools and skills to increase the self-efficacy of both current and future counselors.

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