Measuring Changes in Counseling Ethics Education: A Preliminary Study

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Overview

- The Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) standards state the training programs need “to ensure that counseling students develop a professional counselor identity and master the knowledge and skills to practice effectively” (CACREP, 2009, p. 2).

- The American Counseling Association (ACA) emphasizes that ethical competency is paramount for the counseling profession and counseling professionals (ACA, 2014).
Overview

- Counselor education training program standards and counseling professional organizations recognize the importance of counseling ethics education. However, there is a gap in current research measuring changes in ethical competencies.

- Even though ethics education is required for counseling students, changes in their ethical competencies are not often measured.
Purpose

- The purpose of this preliminary study was to identify the changes in counseling ethics competencies among counseling students who participated in a stand-alone introductory counseling ethics education course.
- The counseling ethics education course utilized experiential-based activities as the main classroom instruction tool.
- Counseling Ethics Audit (CEA) was the instrument utilized to measure changes in ethical competencies.
Counseling Ethics Audit (CEA)

- The CEA was developed by a counseling ethics expert, Michael Kocet, Ph.D. in 2010. It is intended to guide professional counseling practice across settings. Initially, it is presented as a tool to foster counseling ethical sensitivity and reflection among practicing counselors.

- The CEA has 39 questions and focuses on nine areas of counseling ethics competencies: ethical awareness and sensitivity, informed consent, supervision and consultation, confidentiality, record keeping and documentation, boundaries, counseling setting, cultural sensitivity, and continuing education and training.
The scales for this instrument are scored from \(1=\text{never}\) to \(10=\text{always}\).

For the purpose of this study, the researchers identified 17 questions addressing ethical sensitivity, 14 questions addressing ethical skills, and 8 questions addressing ethical training.

For reliability analyses, each area demonstrated a high reliability of the participants’ answers with the CEA. The Cronbach’s alpha was .93 for ethical sensitivity, .87 for ethical skills, and .79 for ethical training.
Significance

- To address an important gap in the counselor education literature on measurement of counseling ethical competencies among counseling students.

- Lack of “scholarly focus on describing how counselor education programs as a whole address professional ethics” (Hill, 2004, p. 184) and lack of “information available about ethics education in counseling” (Urofsky & Sowa, 2004, p. 2).

- Therefore, there is need to measure and identify educational practices in ethics education and its effectiveness in counselor education training programs.
Theoretical Framework

- This study may support the application of experiential teaching strategies for counseling ethics education.

- Experiential education confirms that it can be an excellent teaching strategy given how it promotes natural interest within students, creates a meaningful and fun learning environment, enhances long-term memory and productivity, and produces a defined set of skills to survive in later life.

- Experiential education provides an avenue to promote students’ engagement in the learning process and outcomes.
Methods

- Following an IRB approval, all participants were provided with an informed consent, invited to complete a pre-test CEA and demographic form during the first day of class, and a post-test CEA during the final day of class.

- This study was a single group pre-test and post-test design. The paired t-tests were analyzed using the Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0 to measure the pre-test and post-test differences.
Findings: Ethical Sensitivity

- **Ethical sensitivity** (counseling awareness; counseling setting; cultural sensitivity) showed an increase with the pre-test ESen scores ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.93$) to the post-test scores ($M = 7.88$, $SD = 1.53$).

- A paired t-test showed that the pre-test and post-test differences were highly significant ($t(16) = 11.10$, $p < .0001$, Cohen’s $d = 2.84$). The effect size of the difference is considered very large.

- **Ethical sensitivity** refers to the ethical standard of self-awareness and avoidance of imposing values on clients.
Findings: Ethical Skills

- **Ethical skills** (informed consent; confidentiality; record keeping and documentation; boundaries) showed a huge increase with the pre-test ESkills scores ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.37$) to the post-test scores ($M = 7.43$, $SD = 1.32$).

- A paired t-test showed that the pre-test and post-test differences were highly significant ($t(16) = 12.55$, $p < .0001$, Cohen’s $d = 3.53$). The effect size of the difference is considered very large.

- **Ethical skills** refers to the actions of practice such as designing and using an informed consent and maintaining confidentiality. Counseling students were new and unfamiliar at applying ethics skills, hence it would make sense that this area demonstrated a very significant increase.
Findings: Ethical Training

- **Ethical training** (supervision and consultation; continuing education) showed a large increase with the pre-test ETrain scores ($M = 2.18$, $SD = 1.28$) to the post-test scores ($M = 6.75$, $SD = 1.65$).

- A paired t-test showed that the pre-test and post-test differences were highly significant ($t(16)=11.36$, $p < .0001$, Cohen’s $d = 3.13$). The effect size of the difference is considered very large.

- **Ethical training** refers to the practices of enhancing skill development and developing habits of consultation in ethical dilemmas. Although counseling students are supervised at multiple levels and frequencies, the habits of attending meaningful trainings or seeking out supervision when it is not part of a training program may not be competencies that will increase.
Implications

- The ability to measure changes in counseling ethical competencies among counseling students throughout their training and across different training programs is important for future development and enhancement of counselor education and supervision curriculum and classroom instruction.

- Ongoing research to adapt, develop, and create a valid and reliable instrument will help guide counseling ethics education instruction at universities which offer counselor education training programs.
Future Research Suggestions

- Although the CEA was designed for practicing counselors, it has relevancy to measure the ethical skills development for counseling students.
- Future research can evaluate, adapt, and enhance the CEA for specific application for counseling students.
- Consideration may be given to design an instrument to measure changes in counseling ethical competencies among counseling students.
Research Contact Details

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