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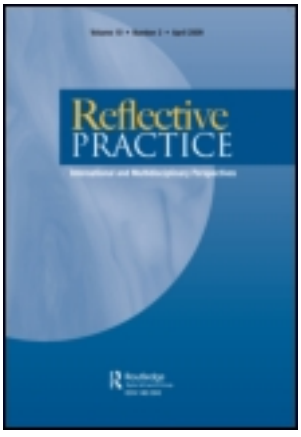

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Understanding, valuing, and teaching reflection in counselor education: a phenomenological inquiry

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Understanding, valuing, and teaching reflection in counselor education: a phenomenological inquiry

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Considering the complexities inherent in mental health practice, developing student reflective capacities may be the most important part of preparing future counselors for success in the field (Griffith & Frieden, 2000). While the critical nature of this educational objective has been recognized in the literature, a deeper understanding of how reflection is defined, the intricacies of the reflective process, and the means by which reflection is promoted within counselor education is absent. Through the personal voices of counselors in training and counselor education professors, this phenomenological inquiry explicates the nature and the value of reflection in addition to how reflective practice is best taught and learned. Findings link to the literature and suggest the explicit inclusion of deliberate types of reflective pedagogy within counselor education.

Keywords: reflection; reflective practice; counselor education; pedagogy; professional development; personal development; phenomenology

Introduction

Counselor educators train students to function within complex and varied professional environments requiring consistent re-conceptualization of individual and systemic functioning with the intention of improving the mental health of the populations with whom they work. These future counselors must develop the ability to revise consistently their base of knowledge and skillset in order to treat clients effectively within complex contexts (Mann, Gordon, & MacLeod, 2009). Self-awareness is regularly referred to in counseling literature as the professional competency necessary for responding to such environments (American Psychological Association [APA], 2002; Peterson, Peterson, Abrams, & Stricker, 2006; Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005) and the process of reflection is the means by which self-awareness is made possible among students and new counselors (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Peterson et al., 2006; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1995).

While literature from multiple fields speaks to the benefits of reflection and reflective practice (Dinkelman, 1998; Holstrom, Ruiz, & Weller, 2007), and many attempts to further refine this complex concept have been advantageous from a theoretical perspective, little is understood about the counseling student's conceptualization of it and the actual practice and effectiveness of counselor educators'

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attempts at promoting it. The literature has highlighted the lack of, and therefore the need for, clarity in this area (Bleakley, 2000; Wright, 2005); specifically, qualitative understandings of the reflective process are needed (Guiffrida, Jordan, & Barnes, 2007). Without knowledge of the nature of students' reflective practices, interventions aimed at facilitating and promoting them are somewhat ill-informed. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to help counselor educators:

(a) gain greater clarity about student and faculty understandings of reflection;
(b) recognize the necessity and relevance of educating reflective counselors (Mann, Gordan, & MacLeod, 2009); and
(c) gain insight into participant-recommended strategies for developing reflective practitioners.

In short, in order to maximize the effectiveness of reflective practice, it is necessary to develop the body of knowledge related to clearly defining and teaching it (Jay & Johnson, 2002) in a manner that more deliberately matches the level of understanding of the student. Because there is little guidance available for counselor educators in their efforts to understand and develop reflective abilities (Mann, et al., 2009), and the concept is inherently complex (Jay & Johnson, 2002), such inquiry is best met through a phenomenological approach (Sommer, Ward, & Scofield, 2010).

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Reflection and counseling

The increasing use of the term reflection and inquiry in reflective practice is due in large part to Donald Schön's (1983, 1987) work in which he argued for a new epistemology of educational practice that would focus on the reflection-in-action process used to help create meaning and choose a direction within situations of uncertainty, uniqueness, and conflict. While definitions of reflection are varied, (see Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Dewey, 1933; Moon, 1999; Schön, 1987) common features tend to include purposeful critical thinking of both knowledge and experience in order to achieve deeper understanding (Mann, Gordon, & MacLeod, 2009), the questioning of assumptions using metacognitive functions to increase awareness (Griffith & Freiden, 2000; Schön, 1987), and the construction of meaning-making systems (Kegan, 1982; Schön, 1983).

The models of reflective practice are varied as well (see Dewey, 1933; Hatton & Smith, 1995; King & Kitchener, 1994; Mezirow, 1991; Schön, 1983, 1987). For example, the Reflective Judgment Model (King & Kitchener, 1994) uses developmental staging to describe the cognitive processes individuals use to justify their beliefs through progressive stages of reflective judgment. Research considering these models and deliberately integrating the reflective process in educational settings shows significant domain-specific developmental achievements (moral, conceptual, ego) as a result of the strong focus on fostering reflective engagement through such activities as journaling, role-play, ethics case studies, dilemma discussions, and small group reflective activities (Brendel, Kolbert, & Foster, 2002; Foster & McAdams, 1998; Schmidt & McAdams, 2009; Sprinthall & Scott, 1989).

Reflection and reflective practice are indispensable characteristics of professionally competent providers of care (Argyris & Schon, 1974; Boud et al., 1985; Epstein & Hundert, 2002; Moon, 1999; Schön, 1983; Schön, 1987) and are the primary methods of professional development for counselors (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992).

Authors (Hanna & Ottens, 1995) have described reflective practice as the counselor quality that most distinguishes mediocre counselors from exemplary ones. Because the practice enhances critical thinking and self discovery, reinforces learning, and is a gateway through which insights and meanings develop (Griffith & Frieden, 2000), it has been shown to promote personal and professional growth (Collins, Arthurn, & Wong-Wylie, 2010), build professional stamina (McMullen, 2001), increase multicultural competence (Park-Taylor et al., 2009), facilitate theoretical fit (Guiffrida, 2005), enable personal value clarity (Sax, 2006), and assist in enhancing reflective processes in clients, which ultimately contributes to the development of the clinical relationship and positive outcomes (Kramer, 2000). Simply stated, research supports the idea that 'educating reflective practitioners may be the most significant part of preparing future counselors' (Griffith & Frieden, 2000, p. 82).

While there is obvious agreement concerning the importance of reflective practice in counselor education, no specific research has been carried out to determine how students and counselor educators understand this complex and varied concept. Considering the calls for research to clarify the concept and understand the relationship between reflection and learning (Guiffrida, 2005; Mann et al., 2009; Wright, 2005), such an investigation is necessary. One particular challenge in performing such an examination centers on the fact that the act of reflection is personal and dynamic in nature; it is primarily an internal process for both the educator and student (Fischer & Pruyne, 2002).

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Research design

A phenomenological approach, seeking to capture the lived experience with and the context of personal consciousness of this phenomenon can help more broadly conceptualize what might encompass effective practice within counselor education. Such research should facilitate an increased understanding of the common patterns and intricacies of how individuals reflect, the processes utilized, and experiences with effective means of developing reflective abilities with students. Therefore, to guide best practices of educators and supervisors in understanding the unique characteristics of reflection going forward, it is suggested that a phenomenological exploration is critical. This study responds to the present gap in the research.

This study explored student and faculty understandings into the nature of reflection and beliefs about how reflective practice is best taught and learned. The primary reasoning behind this line of inquiry relates to the calls in the literature for greater understanding of this critical concept. Secondly, the school of education in which this study was conducted includes in its conceptual framework the importance of producing *reflective practitioners*. As a result of the counseling program being within the school of education, it is required to integrate each of the elements of the conceptual framework into every program of study and each particular course offered. Through researcher inquiry prior to the study, professors in the counseling program stated that the internship experience and the group supervision that accompanies it present the greatest number of opportunities for reflection. Considering these factors, the research questions were further defined as:

(a) How do individuals define reflection in the context of training second year masters-level counseling students who are providing services to clients and their families within an educational setting?

(b) What is the role of reflection within counselor education?
(c) How are student reflective capacities both taught and learned?

Masters-level counselors and counselor education faculty engaged in the research inquiry through in-depth interviews, observations, and artifact analysis.

In light of the different approaches to reflection in the research literature and the personal, subjective practice of reflection, this study's line of inquiry needed to allow for open interpretations of the individuals in the counseling program. The individual's point of view was of utmost concern, and in particular, the study sought to uncover a thick description (Rossman & Rallis, 2003) of how individuals understood and experienced the complex and multi-dimensional concept and skill of reflection. Hence, an interpretivist paradigm was chosen considering its suggestion that human beings can discover 'intersubjective, common meanings' (Schwandt, 1994, p. 120) and that such meanings might be logically appropriate to similar populations. This research engaged in this process of deciphering meaning of others' meanings, and thus was clearly rooted in the interpretivist paradigm.

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Participant selection

At the time of the study, all student participants were enrolled in the second semester of their second year in a CACREP accredited (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs) masters-level counseling program. A full-time counseling student generally completes the majority of his/her course work during his/her first year, which entails theoretical perspectives on counseling modalities, ethical and professional responsibilities, and multicultural interventions among others. All students were full time and therefore were completing the final semester of their program, which included their on-site internship and their weekly on-campus group supervision course. Students at this stage of their program were chosen purposely due to the fact that initial inquiry revealed that student reflective engagement was a primary goal of the internship experience and subsequent supervision course. All faculty participants were, at the time of the study, leading internship experiences and therefore facilitating weekly on-campus group supervision sessions. Convenience sampling (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003) was used by soliciting faculty and student volunteers involved in group supervision.

Considering the multifaceted nature of this topic, the intent was to focus on the depth of one's reflective understanding rather than the breadth of multiple understandings. Hence, of those who voiced interest in participating in the study, an initial six students and three professors were selected for in-depth interviewing. Additional student involvement remained a possibility throughout the study pending considerations of data saturation. Students came from different geographical locations along the east coast, including three family counseling students, two school counseling students, and one clinical mental-health counseling student. Ages ranged from 24 to 36, and out of the cohort, four participants were Caucasian, one was African American, and one was Asian American. Gender make-up included five females and one male, a proportion representative of the counseling program's student body. Three participating faculty represented each of the counseling tracks (family, school, mental health), ranged in age from 45 to 55, and consisted of two Caucasians and one African Caribbean, with two females and one male.

The university institutional review board approved the study and each individual signed an informed consent form prior to the study beginning.

Method

In seeking to uncover intersubjective meanings about reflection that may be logically common, the study explored the lived experiences of the participants through interviews, observations, and artifact examination. The purposes of this phenomenologic inquiry were description, interpretation, and critical self-reflection into the 'world as world' (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). With this in mind, the phenomenological strategy was aligned well with the interpretivist paradigm and research objectives. Researchers utilized Hycner's (1999) explicitation phases for data generation.

Interviews

In choosing to focus on depth rather than breadth in the data generation, each participant engaged in two 45-minute long unstructured in-depth phenomenological interviews (Groenewald, 2004) with one of the three researchers. The interviews were informal-conversational (Patton, 2002) and while the major questions asked were consistent across interviews, the content was open, without close-ended questions or a formal interview strategy (Fontana & Frey, 2005). Follow-up questions evolved during the interview to achieve the depth representative of phenomenological interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) and without imposing any a priori categorization that could limit the field of inquiry (Fontana & Frey, 2005). The first question posed to student participants explored how they defined reflection, and the role reflection played in their becoming a counselor. During the second interview, student participants answered how they learned about reflection, and what educational experiences in their masters program taught them to become more skilled at reflecting. In the faculty interviews, attention focused on how the faculty understood the nature of reflection and how they attempted to teach reflective practice. Interviews provided the opportunity for dialogue and reflection (Rossman & Rallis, 2003) where the students and faculty could define and describe their experiences of reflection and therefore focus on how individuals make sense of their lives and experiences within them (Merriam & associates, 2002). Each researcher tape-recorded the interviews and then transcribed them in order to assist with data immersion. Member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) occurred during the interview and after the transcription of each interview by the provision of the transcript and developing themes to the participants for review. The only changes resulting from member checking included participant extension on certain points on which they sought clarity. These limited additions were added as commentary within the transcripts. Additional member checking also occurred once a working draft of the research findings had been compiled; no participant modifications were warranted at that time.

Observations

Observations are a means to place participant responses in context (Rossman & Rallis, 2003) and see events through the eyes of those being studied (Angrosino, 2005) within their natural setting. Each of the three group supervision classes (family, school, and mental health) was observed by the research team, which

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engaged in note taking throughout the process. During these classes, one observer focused on the professor of the course, the second observer focused on the students and their statements, and the third observer focused their notes on a holistic description of events and interactions taking place. The observers met with one another to clarify and share findings after each observation. Each of the interviewed participants was involved in one of these observations as a student in or professor of the class. Disclosure concerning the research study was given to all and consent was received. These observations intended to uncover elements of reflection and reflective pedagogy including, but not limited to tacit patterns of behavior potentially left out of interview data, the direct experience of reflection in action, and the selective perceptions of participants and researchers (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). As spectators, the researchers worked from an etic perspective (Patton, 2002).

Artifacts

Further description was also provided by the inclusion of artifacts due to their potential for portraying additional influences, values, and beliefs of the participants (Rossman & Rallis, 2003) directly pertaining to the phenomenon under investigation (Christensen & Brumfield, 2010). Such an inclusion has the potential to 'transcend and transform the mundane material world into domains of signification' (Atkinson & Delamont, 2005, p. 827). Researchers sought to access the 'muted evidence' (Hodder, 2000, p. 703) related to reflection potentially inaccessible through interviews and observations alone.

The first artifact included documents outlining the institutional objectives and approaches in regard to reflection in the counseling setting (conceptual framework). Researchers critically analyzed these documents in order to understand their portrayal of educating reflective practitioners and ultimately seek linkages, or lack thereof, between the institutional objectives and the experiences of students and faculty. Second, participants were asked to bring an object to their second interview that represented reflection to them, and were asked to describe to the interviewer the meaning behind the representation. This provided an additional opportunity for a rich portrayal of the individual's beliefs about reflection and an alternate opportunity to access what might have otherwise been absent or silenced from other data sources (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

After obtaining such descriptions, synthesis and interpretation was performed. Throughout the study, and in the discussions of results, the researchers engaged in critical self-reflection upon both the topic of reflection and the process of the investigation. The researchers continually checked and challenged their interpretations and syntheses with one another, with the intention of clarifying intersubjective meanings that were uncovered.

Trustworthiness and authenticity

The methodology applied and the means of interpretation must consider the influence the researchers had on the participants and vice versa. This type of data collection process is susceptible to biased inquiries of the researchers and potential for participant over identification and pressure to perform (Christensen & Brumfield, 2010). In an effort to establish valid findings, ultimately co-created constructions of the phenomena of reflection, multiple methodologies for

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safeguarding interpretive processes were implemented. *Credibility* (Rossman & Rallis, 2003) was ensured through member checking and researchers' debriefings following interviews and observations. *Triangulation* of the data provided a more complex and richer perspective of the phenomenon being studied. Each researcher also fully described previous experiences, beliefs, and values that may have influenced his perspective of reflection in a detailed researcher as instrument document – fostering credibility and enhancing *dependability* and *confirmability* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Use of the emergent interview technique fostered *fairness* toward the participants' points of view, allowing the conversation to follow their particular interpretations and perspectives. *Ontological authenticity* was fostered by interviewing the participants twice; by spacing the interviews in this way, the participants had time to further reflect on their understanding of reflection. After careful examination, coding and analysis of this data led to *catalytic authenticity* in that intersubjective meanings and themes across the participants' perspectives were sought (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

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Data generation

During the establishment of the research questions and prior to initial interviews, researchers engaged in weekly individual reflexive journaling and weekly research group meetings in order to explore assumptions and biases in an effort to limit their influence on the study. These bracketing exercises continued throughout the process of data generation and analysis. Emergent analysis provided a lens through which to understand and explore the experiences of the different participants. In keeping with the phenomenological nature of this study, independent analysis of the data began at the completion of each individual interview (Rossman & Rallis, 2003) through personal transcription and multiple reviews of the individual interviews. The unit of analysis was the discrete idea and examination of the interview data first focused on providing a thick description of participant understandings and then reducing the data into units of relevant meaning with illustrative quotations. The researchers then clustered the units of meaning holistically, allowing for central themes to emerge that expressed the essence of the clusters (Hycner, 1999). After each interview, a list of central themes was then sent to the participants (along with the transcript) who were asked whether the interview transcription correctly captured their words and to make any additions they saw fit. After integrating changes, review of original transcripts occurred again, and the research team adjusted the central themes if required. Upon completion of this process for each interview, the research team engaged in lengthy collaborative discussions concerning the development and comparison of the central themes using original transcripts. The research team used those meetings to finalize the prevalent intersubjective master themes, indicating shared experiences and the essence of meaning for the entire group (Johnson & Christensen, 2004).

Participants described their chosen artifact and how it represented reflection within the context of their second interview; hence, their perspectives on this data point were part of the transcription and therefore part of the explicitation phases of analysis. Researchers reviewed the documents outlining institutional objectives and the conceptual framework, and located those areas relevant to reflective practice, its level of importance, and how it is meant to be facilitated in the classroom. Research

team discussions concerning individual findings and their relationship to the themes were completed. The researchers met as a team after each observation to share the particular perspective they observed (faculty, student, holistic) in order to clarify understanding and finalize note taking. Each researcher individually reviewed observation notes for themes and then collaborated together to integrate findings into the intersubjective master themes developed through interview analysis. Each data gathering method contributed uniquely to the master themes: interviews – subjective understanding; artifacts – enhanced depth through personalized representation; and observations – participants functioning within the natural reflective setting. To assist this process, researchers used concept mapping (Novak, 1991) and organized verbatim excerpts aligned to the themes to enrich the results. Researchers shared the final results with each participant to ensure correct portrayal of thoughts and statements.

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Results

Phenomenological analysis identified multiple interrelated themes with varying degrees of complexity. Themes have been organized into three categories organized around the research questions, an outline of which can be found in Table 1. Interview and participant artifact data are represented in each category; most observational data aligned with the third category.

Category 1: defining reflection

Interview inquiry into participant understandings of reflection generated multifaceted intersubjective themes; in this category, the three sections below contain the seven major defining themes.

Table 1. Categories and themes.

Category	Theme
(1) Defining reflection	(1) Idiosyncratic (2) Natural process (3) Internal and external (4) Process of assessment (5) Starts with looking back (6) Requires active engagement (7) Increases perspective taking
(2) The role of reflection in fostering personal and professional growth	(1) Making sense of complex experience (2) Essential to attitude and awareness development (3) Evaluating personal development
(3) The teaching and learning of reflection	(1) Catalytic experiences (2) Creating space (3) Support and challenge

Category 1, themes 1–3: reflection is an idiosyncratic, natural process practiced both internally and externally

The participants unanimously described reflection as idiosyncratic in that different people experience it in unique ways and have their own styles of doing so. It appears that the process of reflection can become so ingrained within one's mode of functioning that the action of doing it contextualizes one's thought processes in such a way that some do not separate that action from who they are: 'Well, I guess in a word, it describes who I am'; 'I understand reflection as I learned it, as I lived it since I learned it'.

Alongside the idea of reflection being a personal process, the vast majority of the participants felt that reflection was an instinctual action. 'It's more automatic, but it's not a definite thing; it's a learning process. It comes from within, but it needs to be developed'. Another saw it as 'an instinct. I almost think that it is there; it just needs to be brought out. I think almost everybody has the skill to an extent; it's just more pronounced in some people and hidden in others'. Findings also show how participants understood that reflection is not solely an individual process but the sharing of reflections with others allows for further deliberation and hence a greater understanding. One student described having the innate ability but also the desire 'to have verbal interaction with somebody...and that aids in my reflection...so, I guess for me, reflection is a personal thing on one hand, but then it becomes sort of an interactional, social thing'.

Category 1, themes 4–6: reflection is a process of assessment, initiated by looking back, which requires active engagement

Participants described and emphasized a general progression of the reflective process involving experiencing something, recognizing their feelings about it, and analyzing those feelings. One student stated:

> I think it's taking in an experience or a certain set of information and trying to make sense of it yourself and trying to attribute personal meaning to it and the next step is taking that information and figuring out how it fits into your future behaviors.

Although each individual concluded his or her reflective process at different points, every participant defined the first step as one of looking back. This idea was underscored in statements such as:

> I see reflection as the ability to step back from what's happening currently, and look back at the processes of what's happened in the past, or the processes of the group you've interacted with, and use that information to guide how you act presently and in the future.

One student's tangible representation of reflection was a fossilized whalebone. Viewing it reminded her of the longevity of the reflective process and this encouraged her to ask not only about her current developmental experiences, but also 'how does this experience fit into my big picture?'

Participants shared that although the act entailed an innate quality, deeper levels of reflection required a level of active commitment. Participants accentuated reflection's active nature in statements such as 'making sense of a situation', 'analyzing your beliefs', 'recapturing and organizing my thoughts', 'reevaluating and clarifying

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thoughts', and 'delving into what it means to me, what it would mean to my client, what does it mean in the context of that relationship'.

Category 1, theme 7: reflection is an activity that increases one's ability to understand diverse perspectives

Participants highlighted that counselors utilize, or should utilize, the reflective process throughout their work because it enables them to evaluate their approach and their effectiveness while giving them the tools necessary to understand the beliefs and values of others. Eight of the nine participants explained 'perspective taking' as a critical element in how they defined reflection and a critical component of increasing their awareness and acceptance for other belief systems. They mentioned that it was through perspective taking that they further recognized how and why individuals felt or thought the way they did. One participant described reflection as:

> being able to promote tolerance and understanding and the capacity to recognize multiple perspectives at any given time. . .not to just take a relativistic perspective, but to be able to recognize multiple viewpoints and then bring them, more than one's own personal biases, into play.

Another participant described her artifact, an ocean painting, as a reflective reminder due to the fact that her perception of the ocean's 'attitude' differed each time she viewed the painting: 'It just reminds me how much my thoughts and emotions impact my perspective on things'.

Category 2: the role of reflection in fostering personal and professional growth

Concerning the second research question, all of the participants saw reflection to be an essential process in learning and growth, both in their personal lives and in their role as counselors. Participants used reflection for examining past behavior, and the causes and motivations that may have driven such behavior. In particular, the participants frequently spoke of reflecting on their own mistakes and trials. Reviewing these shortcomings and challenges often led to greater self-understanding, which in turn fostered changes in their future behavior.

Category 2, theme 1: reflection assists individuals in making sense of complex experiences

Consistent with the earlier discussion on the definition of reflection, students and faculty indicated that making sense of one's experiences is a primary purpose and value of reflection. Students discover the value of reflection when situations confront them that they find difficult to assimilate with their previous understanding. A student's journal (her chosen artifact) assisted her description of managing these types of experiences: 'Looking back over it, I can tell just by my handwriting, where challenges presented themselves. Seeing my handwriting change reminds me that I've overcome difficult events in the past and I can do it again'.

A faculty member emphasized that this sense-making is particularly challenging and meaningful if the present experience is new, complex, or significant:

> I think of reflection as the capacity for making sense of an experience that is definitely outside one's self and reflecting on one's own experience of that experience and being able to construct some sort of an analysis of it.

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Another stated:

> [The students] often come in bright and intelligent but not necessarily ready to deal with the multiplicity of experience. Their success depends on their ability to look at their experience – past, present, future – and to make choices based on an integrated perspective.

The voices of participants during the observations corroborated their interview descriptions. In classes observed, students were very straightforward with their feelings of frustration and/or confusion regarding client situations and sought guidance from their cohort.

Category 2, theme 2: reflection plays an essential role in changing one's attitude and behavior in the future

Participants placed value on the aspect of the reflective process, which allowed them to connect the present with the past in order to guide future behaviors. When asked to bring a tangible object representative of her reflective process, one participant brought in a compass, noting that '[a compass] is really a good way to symbolize that the reflective process is about direction.... The process of reflection allows me to gauge: am I on the path I need to be, do I need to change directions?' Two others underscored this element:

(a) 'I look at what I've done and how people react, if it was positive or negative experience for them and me, and then I either do it again or I don't'.
(b) 'After each experience in the program I have learned new things. Then I go back and reflect. Once I reflect, I come out knowing what works for me and leave behind the things that don't work. It's an ongoing cycle'.

Category 2, theme 3: reflection enhances one's ability to evaluate their personal development

All of the participants noted that reflecting on oneself can reveal how one has changed over time, and thus indicate how one has grown. In reflecting on how they learned to reflect, most of the students noted that their reflective process expanded over time, particularly in regard to the content and level of abstraction. At younger ages, their reflections concerned more 'superficial' and 'external' experiences and events, while in adulthood, and particularly in the counseling program, their reflections regularly focused on their own self-development:

> Through reflection I grew. My eyes were open to different things. Had I not been reflecting, not had the opportunity to do so, or been forced to look at things in a different way, I might have stayed in my own little frame of reference.

One participant utilized his picture of a butterfly to explain how reflection played a role in major and minor personal changes over time (i.e., egg, caterpillar, chrysalis, etc.).

Category 3: the teaching and learning of reflection

Participants shared how deliberately applied practices within the educational experience help to develop reflective aptitudes. Both faculty and student voices

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highlight key themes which emerged out of the inquiry into the teaching and learning of reflection.

Category 3, theme 1: reflection is promoted through catalytic experiences

The counseling program offered, and in some instances required, students to immerse themselves in new experiences. Participants unanimously considered these types of challenges as critical for promoting and fostering reflective capacities. Several classes emerged as significant professional experiences that fostered reflection – group counseling, multicultural counseling and group supervision in particular. Students emphasized the experiential components of group supervision as significant reflection-promoting activities (class discussions (in person and electronically), viewing and receiving feedback on videotaped counseling sessions, and instructor feedback on journals). One student stated: 'We had to reflect after each exercise each week, which really helped you to stay in the moment to reflect on what happened to me, to my feelings'.

In addition to engaging classroom activities, the internship experiences offered multiple opportunities for reflection in their work with clients. One student shared how working within a community very different from his own helped him improve his reflective abilities and gain increased comfort with reflective practice:

> We work in a very poor community; I have to be able to see where I am internally and where others are, and see where I can find a bond so that I can live in a somewhat complimentary relationship.

Another student mentioned the extent to which her varied work experiences influenced her reflection: 'I've had different experiences, which have helped me to develop reflection.... I think it is exposure on one hand, to different things, to develop reflection skills'.

Researchers each noted heightened anxiety levels among students during observations due to their lack of experience with a particular population. Although this reflective-intensive experience enhanced personal dissonance initially, by the time of the study, participants had not only adjusted to this new experience and come to value it, but they also felt reticent about its concluding: 'I am going to miss the reflective aspects of supervision because it's a primary part of our learning experience here. So it's a huge part.... Not having that, it's going to be a change, and a challenge'. As a representation of the power of group supervision and the relationships formed within supervision, one student brought a picture of her current supervision cohort as her representative artifact.

Category 3, theme 2: reflection is promoted when a space is created for it

Participants reiterated that environments conducive to reflection needed to be both safe and supportive. One student explained:

> So I think that an incredibly important part of supervision, especially group supervision, is that you need to feel safe with all of your peers and that you are aware of what kind of feedback you work best with and the kind of feedback you know your peers will be giving you.

Additionally, the environment structure needed to allot adequate time for sharing feelings and reflecting collaboratively. Several participants talked about feeling

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frustrated when their class did not allow ample time for reciprocal reflection. Researchers noted in their observations seemingly intentional teaching strategies by one professor that enabled this *space*: taking a non-expert stance, reflecting out loud to the class, and pulling back his interjections into the conversations once students engaged.

In some situations, students said they received messages from the faculty that reflection was valued as long as it did not monopolize class time. If teachers neglected time for students to reflect with peers, some students would then out of necessity create other environments where they could interact socially with their peers and collaboratively reflect about their experiences.

Category 3, theme 3: reflection is promoted when there is an optimal environment comprised of a willingness to support students with a willingness to challenge them

The ideal reflective environment was not simply a highly supportive one. While safety was a necessary component, participants sought and delivered constructive feedback in sometimes demanding environments and therefore the balance between support and challenge needed consistent consideration. Referring to this balance, a faculty member stated:

> Initially when my students start reflecting it can be hard work, but naturally it comes to them and then it moves from being conscious to unconscious. They think of what they were doing when they were with clients and realize that it was unconscious, that it became natural.

Another participant added: 'Self reflection isn't a comfortable experience, but it can become a confirming one'.

Researchers noted one particular class observation in which there appeared to be a culture of support that had been ritualized over time. The class naturally began with a *check-in*, an exercise in which students could share reflections and gain feedback initializing the supportive atmosphere. In line with this theme, a student represented reflection with pruning shears, explaining the similarities between the reflective process and gardening: '. . .needing to cut parts away in order to focus on a particular type of growth while also protecting it (the plant) during difficult times'.

Assigned reflective journals appeared to allow for an individually focused balance of challenge and support. Faculty evaluated student-counselor growth, their ability to reflect on their experiences, and sought out indications that they could take multiple perspectives. The participants emphasized the importance of guided reflection in their journals – receiving personalized and relevant feedback and follow-up questions. One professor described that journals must be a meaningful and deliberate exercise: 'They either should be journals that are constructed in a way that students share them with each other and garner feedback, or they need to have individual responses to each journal from the professor'.

Discussion

These research findings emphasize the enormous value of reflective engagement within counselor education curriculum and course design. The personal voices of the participants substantiate and extend the literature regarding how reflection is understood, the role it plays in the process of counselor development, and the most

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effective means to promote it. This discussion places the categories and themes previously described, within the context of the literature on reflection and offers implications based on participant voices.

The themes of participant definitions both support and elucidate efforts in the literature to define this multifaceted concept. The challenge researchers face in clarifying the nature of reflection indicate the personal nature by which it is understood. The concept has been described as having 'elusive boundaries', 'various facets', a phenomenon with 'tremendous variation', and something that is 'difficult to characterize' (Jay & Johnson, 2002, p. 73). Strong's (2003) application of a social constructionist perspective while engaging students in reflection appears to embrace this idiosyncratic notion. Students in particular felt challenged in the process of trying to define reflection. While their definitions were distinctive, the major themes seem to reiterate and extend the literature related to reflecting both individually and collaboratively (Jay & Johnson, 2002), looking back as an initial step (Hutchings & Wutzdorff, 1988; Valli, 1997), and the necessity of active engagement (Dewey, 1933). Many participants utilized the interview process and the choosing of their artifact to assist their definition of this seemingly subjective phenomenon. Some participants exhibited surprise at their difficulties in concretely describing reflection considering their experiences with performing and/or teaching it. Students felt that their understanding of reflection had developed while in the program, yet they could have used more guidance early on as to what precisely reflection entailed and the rationale behind why they were asked to participate in it.

Results clarified the role reflection plays in enabling comfort with dissonance invoking experiences, extending perspective taking abilities, and gaining a greater awareness of personal development. Participant voices concerning the role and process of reflection resonate with Schön's (1983) discussion of the direction of reflection specifically in regard to action. Schön distinguished reflection-on-action from reflection-in-action, noting that reflection-on-action is reflection on practice after the event or situation while reflection-in-action is 'reflecting on practice while "in the midst of it"' (p. 61). The former process is one typically engaged in by individuals when they look back at their previous experiences while the latter describes the practitioner who reflects in the moment, as the situation emerges, in order to critique tacit understandings and make new sense of situations that involve uncertainty and uniqueness (Newman, 1999). The participants in this study clearly describe the ability to reflect-on-action as evidenced in their ability to recall the value of learning from previous experiences. Their ability to reflect-in-action remains less clear. However, all appeared to work toward developing this strategy in that they emphasized the importance of reflecting with the client in order to help them become more aware of possible sources of behavior. At the same time, they spoke of performing such reflection with deliberate effort, and while this act became easier over time, they did not believe they had the proficiency of an experienced counselor.

Schön (1987) also described a third type of reflection: reflection on reflection-in-action. This is not simply looking back at one's interaction with a client in practice but it involves uncovering our spontaneous understandings while in the midst of the interactional process. Some student participants revealed an aptitude for practicing this type of reflection due to their stated attempts to uncover the cognitive and affective elements of the interactional process while engaged in it. These participants described an attempt to gain awareness of cognitive and affective motivations

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while in the counseling moment, yet they did not speak directly to the cognitive processing that might enable awareness to evolve into particular behavioral interventions. Also, the faculty indicated that the goal is to help students achieve self-understanding and a sense of counselor style, but they did not articulate specifically the intent to foster such meta-awareness. This might suggest that individuals need to attain advanced levels of cognitive development to think and act in these dialectic ways (Merriam, 2004). It appears that counselors in training could benefit from overviews of the role and process of reflection as it specifically relates to particular courses and activities.

Knowledge gained through participant voices with regard to teaching and learning reflection highlights the role that counseling programs must play in providing challenging reflective experiences. Ensuring that students are held to high standards through their internship experience, in addition to providing experiences throughout the curriculum that force students out of their comfort zone, appears to facilitate and enhance the reflective process greatly. Some participants referenced these types of experiences during particular courses (multicultural counseling and group counseling) and felt such assignments needed to be included in their coursework to a greater extent.

Relative to the themes concerned with utilizing reflection to help understand the beliefs and values of others, King and Kitchener (1994) believe this quality exists in the higher stages of reflective judgment. Much of the literature on developmental education with counselors speaks to the importance of assisting students to increase their awareness of other's perspectives due to the fact that it increases their ability to respond empathetically to the client (Bowman & Allen, 1988; Bowman & Reeves, 1987; Neukrug & McAuliffe, 1993) and enables a greater capacity to understand and meet the needs of the client (Peace, 1995). All participant perceptions brought to light this feature of the reflective process.

All students and faculty reiterated that the act of perspective taking was a critical topic of reflective thought that lead to counselor development. Such emphasis should lead educators to consider how perspective taking activities might be more explicitly encouraged across the curriculum. Early in the program, practice in perspective taking could take place through case studies and interviews and it could be developed further during the practicum and internship supervision processes. Individual supervision offers an ideal opportunity for individualized and guided perspective taking endeavors. Explicit inclusion of this element in the curriculum could lead supervisors to create more intentional reflective activities.

The participant viewpoints on the impact of experience in reflective growth echo the literature that highlights the importance of particular types of cognitive stimulation and enrichment (Fischer & Pruyne, 2002). The integration of different reflective assignments in multiple educational contexts requires a culture of trust and support (Jay & Johnson, 2002). Researchers emphasize how education in general may not be a key factor in reflective thinking, but rather a certain kind of education – a focus on reasoning about ill-structured problems (Fischer & Pruyne, 2002). The participants underscored examples of this kind of education through describing the role of integrating experience with reflection and theory with practice (Giovannelli, 2003).

The incorporation of individualized feedback into reflective activities stood out as one of the more critical design suggestions from the participants – and students in particular. Student participants repeatedly spoke about the impact individual feedback

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had on encouraging them to further reflect on a particular topic and continue to process the topic with others in dialogue. When students received only minimal feedback on journal entries, they regarded the exercise as significantly less beneficial. Such findings should encourage counselor educators to integrate new creative pedagogical methods to guide their students through this exclusively individualized process of reflection. Pedagogical practices that utilize cultural auditing, theoretical emergence modeling, and metaphoric stories (Collins, et al., 2010; Guiffrida, 2005; Sommer, et al., 2010) are initial movements in this direction. This is an area rich for future inquiry. It must be considered that if we cannot presume a sophisticated competence for critical reflection (Reiman, 1995), then intentional and individual feedback might be considered best practice. While it is likely that students who enter counseling graduate programs will self-select due to an intuitive desire and ability to reflect, counselor educators need to be aware that not all students enter graduate programs with the same reflective abilities. Even for those students who previously practiced reflecting on their personal experiences, facilitating their operationalization of reflection more formally appears to be an essential part of assisting the development of their professional identities as counselor.

The literature overwhelmingly supports the necessity to create a safe space for reflection in which students experience a secure foundation to build knowledge and critique knowledge in order to make responsible decisions (Danielowich, 2007). Griffith and Frieden (2000) emphasize how a non-threatening atmosphere can allow collaboration between counselors in training, leading to new insights and a broadened understanding of the change process. Students can sustain a functional level of reflective thought individually; however, an optimal level is achievable in the presence of contextual support for high performance (Fischer & Pruyne, 2002).

Many participants stated that the important supportive role their classmates or cohort group played in their reflective process and the personal and professional bond that evolved during the process. This led them to discuss their hesitancies to enter the workforce without a link to a reflective group. In comparison, pre-service teachers are not likely to sustain learned reflective abilities in their first few years as teachers (Jay & Johnson, 2002); assuming a similar circumstance for counselors in training, counselor educators might consider how programs can assist students' development of reflective capacities post-graduation. Additional research could examine the effectiveness of external reflective group settings, whether online or in-person, similar to those designed for new teachers (Glazer, Abbott, & Harris, 2004; O'Neill & Harris, 2005).

Students and faculty all prioritized the importance of effectively balancing support and challenge when attempting to promote student development in particular domains. Their perspectives align closely with the model of conceptual level development (Hunt, Butler, Noy, & Rosser, 1978), which addresses the need to provide highly supportive environments for students who initially experience high levels of disequilibrium. After the learner acclimates to the new experience, support is reduced slightly to allow additional dissonance to occur. Though a counselor supervisor is non-judgmental, he or she must be willing to push students into a present state of discomfort (Griffith & Frieden, 2000), not allowing them to escape – remove themselves from opportunities for development – either actively or passively (Fischer & Pruyne, 2002). This balance is critical in that the learning context must support – and even demand at times – a student's promotion of reflective capacities for such capacities to be accommodated into everyday functioning

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(Fischer & Pruyne, 2002). Although faculty shared that they attempted to provide both elements effectively, students generally felt that they could have been challenged to a greater extent. Despite faculty agreement that an effective balance of challenge and support should be applied continuously in order not to halt growth potential (Reiman, 1995), they shared that to provide such a balance can be pedagogically demanding. Establishing measurements of students' reflective awareness and growth over time would prove extremely beneficial for further inquiry into the development of reflective practitioners. King and Kitchener's (1994) model supplies a framework to gauge one's level in this regard, but the quantification of such data could allow for more individualized and deliberately considered interventions.

Summary

This study's small sample size and its focus solely on one counselor education program provides only a snapshot, albeit one with great depth, into understanding this complex topic. The impact this particular educational environment has on the topic of inquiry needs consideration. The student participants and two of the researchers completed courses taught by some of the same core faculty members. Hence, the possibility exists that both group's perceptions of reflection were influenced, at different levels, by these faculty. Research within multiple settings would extend and further refine these findings and should promote more intentional reflective education and practice.

The process of personal development within a counselor training program is oftentimes viewed as equally important to professional development due to the significant levels of interpersonal interaction involved in the work. Reflective pedagogies have enhanced student moral, conceptual, and ego development alongside their professional development (Kaiser & Ancellotti, 2003; King & Kitchener, 1994; Sprinthall & Scott, 1989). Because counselors' competence relates directly to their ability to understand and conceptualize problems from multiple perspectives, developing reflective practitioners through deliberate pedagogy should be a major objective of counselor education programs (Griffith & Frieden, 2000). This study offers additional suggestions for enhancing student reflective capacities from the stakeholders' point of view and should be considered within curriculum design.

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