
Becoming empowered: A study of counsellor development

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Abstract

This study was designed to explore the question of what experiences contribute to the development of effectiveness as a counsellor. A qualitative research methodology was utilized in which doctoral students from one program in counselling psychology were interviewed. Based on a thematic analysis of the interviews, a cyclical model of counsellor development is proposed. The overall process has been named "Becoming Empowered" which includes recurring themes identified as: experiencing dissonance, responding to dissonance, relating to supervision and feeling empowered. Several implications of this research are highlighted.

Résumé

Cette étude a été conçue dans le but d'explorer la question de contribution des expériences vécues sur le développement de l'efficacité d'un conseiller. Une méthodologie qualitative a été utilisée auprès d'étudiants au doctorat faisant partie d'un programme de psychologie du counseling. Ce groupe d'étudiants a été interviewé. Un modèle cyclique du développement du conseiller est proposé, basé sur une analyse thématique des interviews. Dans son ensemble, le processus a été nommé "Becoming Empowered" ce qui inclut les thèmes qui reviennent comme: vivre une expérience dissonante, répondre à la dissonance, faire le rapport entre la supervision et le sentiment de compétence et d'assurance. Plusieurs implications de cette recherche sont discutées.

In recent years, several models of counsellor training and supervision based on theories of human development have come to dominate the literature (Holloway, 1987). Widely influenced by Hogan's (1964) seminal paper on counsellor development, these stage models (Friedman & Kaslow, 1986; Hill, Charles & Reed, 1981; Loganbill, Hardy & Delworth, 1982; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987) share a number of common features. They propose anywhere between three and eight stages of counsellor development. The stages themselves are regarded as relatively discrete. Movement through the stages is generally characterized as linear, beginning with an initial state of anxiety and dependence.

The counsellor who emerges from this progression of stages is variously viewed as integrated and realistic (Loganbill, Hardy & Delworth, 1982), having a more coherent professional identity (Friedman & Kaslow, 1986), more independent and self-confident (Reising & Daniels, 1983), and more able to utilize higher-order counselling skills (Hill, Charles & Reed, 1981). Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) propose a career-span model whose final stage depicts counsellors as relying primarily on internal rather than external authority. Stoltenberg and

Delworth's (1987) four stages culminate in a "master therapist" who has integrated skills and knowledge and who exhibits a depth of self-awareness.

These developmental models have undergone the scrutiny of a range of validation studies (Heppner & Roehlke, 1984; Krause & Allen, 1988; McNeil, Stoltenberg & Pierce, 1985; Reising & Daniels, 1983; Wiley & Ray, 1986). Most lend some degree of support to the developmental perspective as it is applied to counsellor growth through formal training and beyond. However, the derivation of that perspective raises questions about its sensitivity to the experience of the counsellors themselves. The growth of counsellors-in-training is generally seen through the perspective of the supervisor, or in the context of supervisor-supervisee relationships. What is missing, for the most part, is the counsellors' views of their own development (Worthington Jr., 1987).

Hill, Charles and Reed's (1981) study is a notable exception. Combining observations of counselling students' clinical performance with qualitative interview data, the researchers proposed four stages of development, beginning with an eager over-investment in the client and ending with integration and self-confidence. Skovholt and Ronnestad's (1992) career-span look at counsellor development also solicits the counsellors' perspective without tying it to the context of supervisions. Using in-depth, semi-structured interviews, they extracted 20 themes in therapist and counsellor development. These qualitative approaches are welcome additions to what is so far a scant body of student-centred research on counsellor trainee development.

The goal of this study was to expand on that work by inductively deriving a description of counsellor development from the perspective of doctoral counsellors-in-training. The question driving the research was "what experiences in the doctoral practicum and internship have been significant in contributing to the development of effectiveness as a counsellor?" The answer has important implications for both counsellor education and supervision.

APPROACH TO THE INQUIRY

The genesis of the study is an interest in understanding the process by which counsellors come to perceive themselves as effective. The senior authors, both professors in counselling psychology, held the perspective that most training programs are designed based on needs perceived by faculty and suggested literature. A genuine curiosity as to the student perspective motivated this study. The study was not designed as a program evaluation. Rather, interviews and analysis focused on students' lived experiences versus program components. The methodological framework of this study was an adaptation of procedures associated with grounded theory (Glaser, 1978; 1992). Emphasis throughout the study

was on “emergence” versus “forcing” of theory (Glaser, 1992). Our commitment was to being responsive to the data in the decisions taken with regard to methodology.

The principle data for the study were generated through interviews with a primary sample of doctoral students in the final stages of their internship at a variety of professional settings, some of which were APA and CPA approved. These participants had completed all of their course work and practicum requirements for the PhD. at the university where the senior authors are professors in the program. As there were no evaluation components remaining the students were therefore in a unique position to comment on their formal training experience.

All members of the internship group were invited to participate and readily agreed to take part. Five were female and four were male. All had previous experience in their professions which were related either to psychology and/or education. In Alberta, psychologists are chartered with a masters degree and therefore some of these people were already psychologists returning for further graduate training. Participants ranged in age from 30 to 45 years with a mean age of 37. All participants had lived in Canada for more than 20 years.

Initially, a single interview of about one hour was conducted with each student by the third author, a senior doctoral candidate. Interviews began with a uniform introduction informing participants that the purpose of the study related to the development of counsellor effectiveness within their supervised clinical experiences. The question asked was, “What experiences in the doctoral practicum and internship have been significant in contributing to your effectiveness as a counsellor?” A consistent style of follow-up probing focused on specificity, elaboration, and clarification of the reported experiences and on their significance to perceived development as a counsellor. All interviews were tape recorded for subsequent transcription by the interviewer. Identifying data were disguised in the transcripts to protect confidentiality. Initial interviews with the primary sample were completed before data analysis began.

Each step of data analysis was performed by each of the three authors. All analysis took place in regular meetings where discussions continued until genuine consensus was achieved. Rather than forcing data into patterns the analysis was true to the “patience, trust and emergence” that characterizes this form of analysis (Glaser, 1992, p. 73). Transcripts were broken into units of meaning defined as complete thoughts communicated by interviewees. No difficulty was experienced in reaching agreement about what constituted the meaning units. Each meaning unit was then reviewed and categorized. Categories were then clustered into themes; the themes were placed in relation to each other. In so doing a basic process was highlighted and named.

At this stage the initial themes and basic process were shared with the primary sample of participants in a group meeting. There was agreement about the categories and the themes. However, as a result of feedback received, the process was reconceptualized to more clearly reflect recurring themes rather than linear stages. To further ensure reliability, the reconceptualized findings were presented to a secondary sample of ten students at a comparable stage in their programs. This group quickly confirmed that the process and themes represented their own experiences and the findings gave rise to considerable enthusiastic discussion. Additionally, the authors consulted with four counsellor educators from another university who had expertise in both the research methodology and the issues inherent to counsellor supervision. There was overall support for the approach to the study, as well as for the developmental process which had emerged in the analysis.

RESULTS

Our data on counsellors' perceptions of their own developing effectiveness uncovered a basic process we have called *Becoming Empowered*. Although the literature has seen an almost tenfold increase in the use of the term "empowerment" in recent years (McWhirter, 1991), the term is usually applied to clients or other service recipients. In the context of this study, empowerment implies a reliance on internal authority (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1991) by the developing counsellor, as well as a sense of personal agency (McWhirter, 1992). As counsellors develop effectiveness, they come increasingly to own the process for themselves, relying with greater frequency on their own judgment and feeling greater control over their responses both within and outside of the clinical setting.

The most noteworthy features of becoming empowered include the finding that counsellor development is most aptly characterized as a cyclical process. This is in contrast to most models of counsellor development, which take a linear approach to development. Although trainees experienced overall movement toward an increased sense of empowerment on both personal and professional levels, they characterized this movement as spiraling rather than linear. The four themes outlined in Figure 1 were experienced repeatedly in a cyclical manner. The phenomena of "experiencing dissonance," "responding to dissonance," "relating to supervision," and "feeling empowered" recur throughout a counsellor's development during the formal training years.

A second feature of what we call becoming empowered which distinguishes it from other models is the observation that anxiety, far from inhibiting or retarding the student's development, is a critical component contributing to the process. Anxiety, expressed through varying degrees of cognitive emotional discomfort, or dissonance (Festinger, 1964; Elkin & Leippe, 1986), was inherent to those situations identified

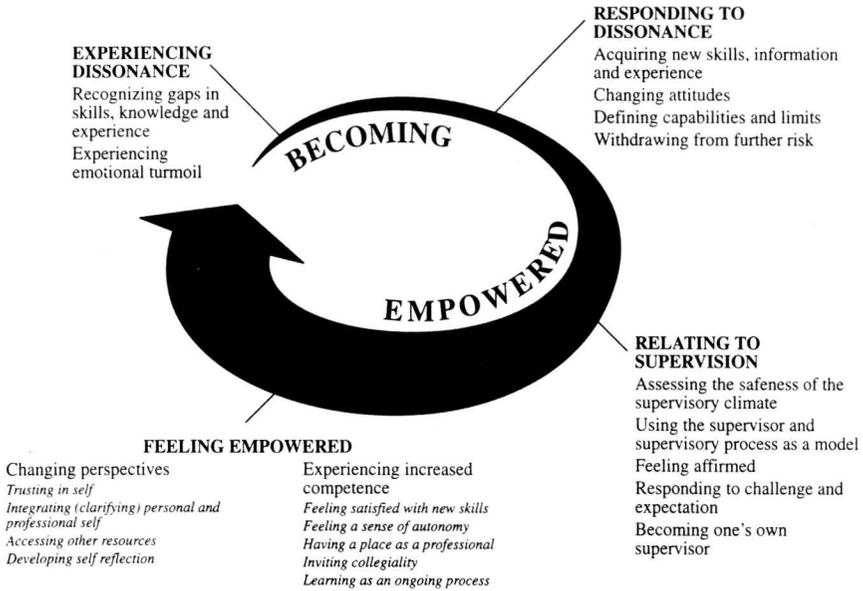


Figure 1

by participants as significant in their training experiences. Dissonance represented a common thread throughout the process of becoming empowered. As the sense of empowerment increased, dissonance was more actively sought and welcomed as a positive experience.

In the following section, the themes of the process of becoming empowered are described and briefly illustrated with examples from our data. Readers will note the interactions among the themes and the overlap among these categories, as interpretive distinctions have been placed upon a fluid developmental experience.

THEME: EXPERIENCING DISSONANCE

It was apparent from our data that graduate students had chosen to enter a dissonance-producing environment. Most often, they had left behind situations in which they experienced a sense of competence and capability in terms of skills, knowledge and everyday practice. They sought to advance their training, realizing that they did not “know enough” or “have all the skills” they believed desirable. The period was one of challenge, of facing up to weaknesses, and of discovering strengths through experimentation, self-questioning, affirmation and self-discovery. Through their return to graduate school, trainees were confronted with new situations involving novel demands and expectations. Our data show that counsellor training involves personal and professional risk with attendant emotional turmoil and excitement.

The overall experience of dissonance might be likened to adolescence, a period of relative anxiety, turmoil, excitement and exploration, the ideal outcome of which is new-found confidence and identity. One trainee, recalling a particularly significant experience, described it as “incredibly interesting, scary and helpful!” Dissonant emotional struggles propelled students in their pursuit of learning. Risk was an intrinsic element, whether by choice or chance. Like adolescents, the questions doctoral trainees appeared to be implicitly asking were: Who am I, as a person, and as a professional? What is the best course of action in this situation? What are my strengths and weaknesses, according to my own standards? How am I to understand and explain this situation? Do I measure up, compared to my peers and in the eyes of my professors?

The theme we have called experiencing dissonance is constituted by two categories, recognizing gaps in skills, knowledge and experience, and experiencing emotional turmoil.

Recognizing Gaps in Skills, Knowledge and Experience

According to our data, the cognitive emotional discomfort of dissonance was most frequently experienced when trainees recognized a gap or deficiency in a particular area of skills, knowledge or experience. Such deficiencies were highlighted when new circumstances were encountered for which trainees were not fully prepared; when feedback showed that an intervention or course of treatment had been inappropriate or unsuccessful; when conflicts or differences in expectations were encountered with other professionals (including supervisors); and when trainees compared themselves to others whom they perceived as more competent or knowledgeable. For example, one trainee recalled that during a seminar involving role-played ethical dilemmas, “I found I didn’t know anything . . . it scared me half to death . . . it showed me what I didn’t know, and that provided impetus to go out and learn really quickly.”

Experiencing Emotional Turmoil

Recognizing skill, knowledge or experience deficiencies gave rise to the discomforting emotions associated with dissonance. Fear, frustration, anxiety and confusion frequently coincided with such recognition. A trainee reported, “I guess I could describe the supervision session as . . . feeling sort of embarrassed and feeling incompetent and maybe . . . a lot of negative feelings came up for me, the upshot of which was very positive.” Emotional turmoil and anxiety were associated with inexperience, with having to rely on oneself more than expected, and with encountering new and threatening patient populations. One trainee summed up his experience counselling in a new area, comprised of

medically ill patients: "I was really overwhelmed . . . the grief is hard, it's hard, I mean, it really hurts . . . all the philosophical issues that come and the emotions, the sadness, and the loss, the anger . . . the having to live with so many unanswered questions." From the analysis of such instances, it was apparent that trainees' professional and personal selves were deeply touched and challenged.

THEME: RESPONDING TO DISSONANCE

Trainee responses to dissonance presented in four categories: acquiring new skills, information and experience; changing attitudes; defining capabilities and limits; and withdrawing from further risk. Risk-taking was an important response to dissonance, but it could only be undertaken with a sense of relative safety. As risky situations were negotiated within a sufficiently safe environment, emotional discomfort abated and increasing levels of confident self-reliance were reported.

Acquiring New Skills, Information and Experience

The most frequently reported trainee strategy in the context of dissonance was the acquisition of either knowledge or experience in order to alleviate exposed deficiencies. For the trainee who discovered deficiencies in his or her ethical background, extensive reading emerged as a strategy. For trainees who lacked exposure to certain client populations or to specific treatment and assessment approaches, remedial experiences were actively sought. For almost all trainees, newly acquired skills and information were assimilated through working in field situations.

Changing Attitudes

The most important changes in attitude related to dissonance itself, in the form of risking experimentation and taking personal responsibility. Many trainees either already held or gradually adopted the view that dissonance was valuable. One trainee voiced the view that "before we grow, or develop or progress along, maybe we need that sort of dissonance." Learning situations involving risk came to be seen as desirable, and were more actively sought. Another trainee reported that treatment as an equal colleague elicited an increasing sense of personal responsibility for overcoming her own weaknesses.

A major component of attitude change was self-reflection, which took the form of soul-searching, self-analysis, journal writing and collegial dialogue. For example, one trainee struggled to the realization that compassion might be an essential component of counselling, and sought to reconcile this aspect with the need to be confrontive in some situations.

Defining Capabilities and Limits

The background question addressed by many trainees was: What am I capable of? Subsequently, self-reflection played a substantial role in clarifying personal and professional capabilities and limits. Difficult situations fostered affirmation of abilities and resources, while also demarcating the boundaries of competence. A form of "constant comparative" method was inherent to development in this area, as trainees compared their current performance to earlier efforts or contrasted their own abilities to those perceived in others.

Withdrawing from Further Risk

In some situations, dissonance was generated in such a way that the trainee was overwhelmed or did not feel sufficiently safe or supported to engage in further risk-taking activities. As reported by our sample, all of the situations which resulted in negative changes in attitude and behaviour involved supervisory approaches perceived as ineffective. In the most vivid example, a trainee had presented a videotape of a difficult session to her supervision group early in training. The trainee felt personally criticized and humiliated by the supervisor. She thought she was placed in an inferior role, and felt confused and angry. "I then felt really closed down and bitter, and thinking, okay, I can play this game . . ." She had taken a risk, and would refrain from such risks until she encountered a safer supervisory setting.

THEME: RELATING TO SUPERVISION

The supervisory relationship was a major focal point for dealing with dissonance. The processing of dissonance in this context was related to a number of dimensions which constitute the categories: assessing the safeness of the supervisory climate, using the supervisor and supervisory process as a model, responding to challenge and expectation, knowing one's limits, and becoming one's own supervisor.

Assessing the Safety of the Supervisory Climate

Supervisory relationships which offered acceptance, confidence, trust, and permission to experiment were welcomed. The need for safety in the supervision context was overtly expressed by nearly all trainees, and implied by others. A foundation of safety increased the willingness to risk and to hear feedback. Weak sessions or problematic clients could be presented without fear of devastating criticism and with the knowledge that constructive learning would emerge. In contrast, when safety was not provided trainees withdrew from further risk and experimentation.

Trainees sensed safety when they felt accepted on a personal level and when they perceived their supervisor as competent. Supervisors offering

these conditions were perceived variously as friends, confidants, companions and colleagues. One trainee stated, "My supervisor is an interesting person. There are depths to him . . . discovering the best parts of me . . . there are layers of our relationship that have certainly been expanding, and that's kind of nice." Others said, ". . . she's been someone I could tell my private feelings to . . . that was really, really important" and ". . . she was simply my companion in a lot of ways . . . it was an evaluative process, but in a large part she was very much a companion of sorts . . . she was very supportive."

Feeling confident that one would be heard without judgment seemed core to the sense of acceptance in the supervisory relationship. One trainee stated, "I was quite verbal about how I was feeling, and I felt the supervisor was receptive to hearing . . . and he wasn't really critical . . . he was supportive." Another noted that his supervisor seemed to "offer me his confidence . . . the phrase that comes to mind is that he brings you home to yourself, in a really comfortable, grounded sort of way. Then you can bring in all your ideas and notions."

A sense of collegial respect was often conveyed, through which the supervisor offered not only basic respect but encouragement to develop one's style as fully as possible in both a personal and professional manner. It was important to be given permission to try a variety of therapeutic approaches and styles. One trainee noted that "the supervisory experience I've had through the internship especially has been really valuable because I've tried out different models to see which one works, which one fits."

Using the Supervisor and Supervisory Process as a Model

The supervisor and the supervisory process were frequently used as a relationship model, either explicitly or implicitly, that was reflected in counsellor development and in trainees' reports of subsequent counseling sessions. This parallel process emerged in a number of ways. It was most readily apparent when the supervisor-supervisee relationship was reflected in subsequent supervisee-client relationships. For example, in one incident supervisory confrontation of a trainee's resistance to exploring a client's sexual history was followed by hesitant but reportedly therapeutic confrontation of the client. In a negative incident, an authoritarian supervisory strategy was followed by an authoritarian family intervention.

Feeling Affirmed

When challenges and expectations were successfully met, trainees reported a sense of feeling affirmed in their knowledge and expertise. Although their comments focused on the more challenging and dissonance producing situations, the ongoing experience of personal

and professional affirmation was critical to counsellor development. Trainees were particularly aware of this affirmation when they successfully handled crises, when they were consulted by peers or supervisors, and when they were compared favourably to other psychologists or mental health workers. This external acknowledgment unquestionably enhanced the movement to empowerment.

Responding to Challenge and Expectation

Challenge was most often experienced relative to difficult clients, and supervision then provided the focal point for developing responses. Within this safe climate, supervisors suggested ideas and possible directions, provided support and confidence, and offered backup competence in the case of difficulties.

Supervisors periodically provided direct challenges. Their supervisees were either required to engage in specific intervention behaviours or to account for their own independent counselling behaviour. For example, one trainee related, "My supervisor pushed me . . . so eventually I plucked up courage and did [what he had suggested], and that was a hurdle that I overcame." When the direct challenges occurred in the context of safety, supervisees internalized responsibility for the intervention.

Becoming One's Own Supervisor

Trainees seemed to regard supervision as an opportunity, particularly as it became increasingly collegial. The need for continuing consultation was recognized, along with a greater sense of monitoring one's own professional practice. One trainee commented, "I'm removed, I'm still there interacting closely with the client, but one part of me is a spectator, commenting." Another stated, "I have a voice in my ear every so often . . . 'how else could this be conceptualized?'" "Almost a split screen. It's the first time I've been aware really of watching myself while I was doing it."

Challenging, dissonance producing situations came to be regarded in more inviting terms. Difficult clients were then seen as opportunities to learn. For example, one trainee noted that "if something isn't totally successful, whatever that means, I say, okay, what did you get out of it? What was the purpose of that experience? The purpose of it was that I became more independent."

THEME: FEELING EMPOWERED

The experience of feeling empowered as reported by our participants embodies a number of sub-categories, embodied within two broad categories — changing perspectives, and experiencing increased competence.

Changing Perspectives

One key dimension of feeling empowered was changes that occurred in a number of related perspectives, summarized as follows:

Trusting in self. Students often commented directly on the increased confidence they experienced by the end of their program. A positive spiral of development was reported. The inner sense of dissonance came to be a signal that opportunity was presenting itself in the form of a difficult case or otherwise challenging situation. Growing trust in self increased confidence which led to being viewed more positively, which led to greater trust in self, which led to taking on new challenges or approaches, and so on. A trainee, noting that he had been encouraged to “be himself,” commented “I think it becomes a bit self-fulfilling . . . because then I felt more relaxed and felt more confident.” Increased confidence was reflected in willingness to try a variety of approaches and to work with varied client populations. A major experience which served to strengthen confidence was exposure to helping clients in crisis. One trainee remarked that handling crisis calls “has been really a confidence-builder . . . like people right on the edge and that, and helping, that has been really, really productive for me.”

Clarifying and integrating personal and professional self. The boundaries and interplay between self as professional and self as person were increasingly clarified. There was recognition of the relationship between becoming a competent professional and being a compassionate person. One participant noted, “how I think it [the program] will be significant for me is that I’m going to become a more compassionate human being.”

Assessing other resources. Trainees showed increased openness to accessing resources, both for help with specific interventions and for feedback about their own self-involvement in the therapy process. This kind of professional maturity was demonstrated by one trainee who noted that after seeing clients several times with no change, “either I need better ideas for interventions or I’d better go talk to somebody, or I’m getting hooked here somehow. Something in my quirks is hooking me and I’d better go talk to somebody about that, too.”

Developing self-reflection. Trainees also reported increased ability to reflect on their own process in offering therapy. Self-reflection was related to abstracting the process in a situation, becoming one’s own supervisor, and integrating personal and professional selves. Self-reflective processes were reported when unsuccessful experiences were reframed as learning opportunities, when “meta” positions were taken, when different levels of meaning were responded to, and when interventions were articulated with greater or fewer degrees of abstractness or concreteness. As an

example of self-reflection, consider the trainee whose initial reception to a therapy group of severely disturbed adolescents was one of extreme hostility and suspicion. Pondering on the significance of this response, she noted, "but then if you transcend that, you take a look at their deprivation, their feeling of abandonment and wondering if he [the psychiatrist] is going to abandon them too. That requires a certain kind of thinking, because what would happen is that theme kept continuing, and then somebody in the group might break down about feeling abandoned by Mom."

Experiencing Increased Competence

Changes in attitude were accompanied by a developing sense of competence in terms of new skills and autonomous case management.

Feeling satisfied with new skills. Trainees sought skills which made a difference for their clients, and were excited and triumphant when the skills were mastered. Skills were related to working with particular client populations or certain therapeutic or assessment approaches. In a more general sense, they included abilities like timing interventions and responding flexibly according to differing client needs. One trainee exposed to a behaviourist approach commented, "I'm really excited about that because now . . . I'm certainly not a strict behaviourist, but it's something I know about and I feel comfortable using." Another noted her satisfaction at being able to do a comprehensive assessment for high risk suicide or psychiatric disturbance, while a third reviewed how he was learning to respond to deeper patterns while "not getting caught in the surface meaning of the relationship."

Feeling a sense of autonomy. Trainees often commented that they felt more able to practice independently. "How have I changed? . . . even though I'm supervised I feel much more autonomous in my case management and in my counselling work . . . to the point that I think in the area of individual counselling I feel competent to do independent practice."

Have a place as a professional. Trainees felt validation concerning the discipline and profession of psychology, along with their place in it. Trainees not only felt equal with other well-trained professionals, but they often commented that they understood their place as a counselling psychologist in the network of human service agencies. It was important to see how they fit in and to feel a sense of belonging. One commented on experience with a pain treatment team in a general hospital: "It was a tremendous validation of how psychological intervention can be useful and effective." Trainees also compared their contributions and abilities to those of others. "I realize I'm a lot more competent or talented than I thought that I was. I feel that I'm the equal of the other therapists here,

that I can do as good a job as they can. That's an important realization, I think."

Inviting collegiality. Reciprocity in collegial relationships was invited and enjoyed by many participants, not only in the community of psychologists, but across disciplines. Sometimes, resources were discovered through people who lacked formal qualifications but were obvious experts in their own right. One trainee worked with a woman who had a "gift with preschoolers." From her she learned how to assess children with limited language skills about their experiences of sexual and physical abuse.

Learning as an ongoing process. Another aspect of empowerment as a professional was experiencing the teaching-learning process with colleagues and clients as a reciprocal, never-ending process. One commented, "my professional colleagues taught me, I taught them, and it is still happening."

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Utilizing an inductive research method, this study identified a series of recurring themes from the perspective of doctoral-level counsellors in training. In many respects, the themes identified were not unlike those conceptualized in previous stage models (Loganbill, Hardy & Delworth, 1982; Hill, Charles & Reed, 1981; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987). Trainees were found to experience an overall movement towards self-reliance and personal agency in their personal and professional lives. However, whereas other models focus on linearity, or make passing reference to cycles (Hess, 1987; Hill, Charles & Reed, 1981), our data suggest the process of counsellor development is most aptly characterized as cyclical, suggesting open-ended, spiraling experiences involving dissonance and empowerment.

These recurring themes may be regarded along a number of continua including: from reliance on uni-dimensional understandings and solutions in contrast to more multidimensional perspectives; from a dogmatic attitude in contrast to an open-minded perspective; from guardedness to risk taking; from reliance on external sources of expertise to reliance on self; from responsibility for the client to shared responsibility with the client; from an apparent need for early closure to greater tolerance for ambiguity. Of the numerous implications that could be derived from the findings of this study three will be highlighted: those related to anxiety, safety and the power of questioning.

Our trainees often identified anxiety with dissonance. However, whereas a number of researchers have identified the detrimental aspects of trainee anxiety related to student evaluation (Liddle, 1986) or role

conflict (Friedlander, Keller, Peca-Baker & Olk, 1987), our data suggest that anxiety may play a constructive role in counsellor development. In the present study, counsellor trainees repeatedly referred to moments of risk and anxiety in reflecting on their growing empowerment. Growth towards empowerment was facilitated by the experience of dissonance which emerged from the recognition of gaps in skills, knowledge and experience.

The findings of this study would suggest that sustaining the tension experienced as dissonance and not usurping decision-making is supporting of an empowering learning process. A common pattern of supervision has the supervisor feeding in the alternatives rather than enabling the student to expand his/her own landscape of possibilities. The counselling literature focusing on questions as interventions (Gilligan & Price, 1992; Mahoney, 1991) points to a possible approach to constructively sustaining the tension associated with movement to empowerment. In applying the questioning stance to supervision we have adopted the perspective that trainees often have within themselves the basis understandings which are key to appropriate interventions. Thus, as counsellor educators our initial task is to use questions to invite supervisees to notice how much or how little understanding they have about the dynamics of the client situation and the possible interventions inherent in their understandings. Our task then becomes to assist them through a questioning process to polish and refine the intervention. Not uncommonly the student identifies a gap in knowledge or skill. When the climate of safety is present the student experiences the dissonance arising from the awareness of the gap as an invitation to acquire new skills, information and experience.

A climate of safety is necessary to encourage the risk-taking behaviour that contributes to this approach of counsellor development. Such a conclusion is congruent with the frequent (Bernard & Goodyear, 1992; Liddle & Saba, 1983; Sawatzky & Lawrence, 1989) characterization of supervision as the isomorph of therapy. Students, not unlike clients, need a safe environment to explore the growth potential of their dissonance.

In conclusion, the process of becoming empowered described here does not imply an endpoint in training at which no discomfort is experienced. Rather, it is an ongoing cyclical process in which anxiety and dissonance play a vital role in counsellor development. This study focuses on a mid-career sample of doctoral students with considerable counsellor related experience. A limitation of this study is that all data were generated retrospectively. Further research in the manner of Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) is needed to gain a wider appreciation of the experience of counsellors at various points in their development.

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