The Influence of Counselor Epistemology on the Helping Interview: A Qualitative Study

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The relationship between certain personal qualities of a counselor and the outcomes of counseling has been well established. In this qualitative study, the authors sought to extend this understanding by examining the relationship between the personal epistemologies of counselor trainees and their interview behaviors. Five distinguishing themes emerged.

As counselor educators, we noticed a curious and daunting phenomenon in our teaching of beginning counseling skills courses: Despite experiential learning, demonstration, structuring of microskills, cajoling, inspiring, and pleading with students about the importance of being person-centered and being attuned to client differences in temperament, personality, and situation, we found that a small percentage of beginning students just “didn’t get it” by the end of the class. They still tended to be rote, authoritarian, concrete, and without insight about clients’ concerns. We wondered what distinguished these students from those who made great progress in conducting helping interviews with clients.

With this concern in mind, we turned to the literature on counselor learning and counselor effectiveness. We found that the effectiveness of counseling lies largely in the person of the counselor rather than in the techniques used (Fiedler, 1950; Rogers, 1951; Wampold, 2001). Empathy emerged as the strongest of those personal characteristics (Wampold, 2001; Whiston & Sexton, 1993). Other specific counselor attributes that are predictive of positive counseling outcome, such as self-awareness, insight, and reflectiveness, were also beginning to be demonstrated empirically as being crucial characteristics of the effective counselor (Wampold, 2001).

Because of our familiarity with constructs and research from an area of developmental psychology increasingly called developmental epistemology, we speculated that a counselor’s stage of epistemological development might be a powerful indicator of readiness to take on the complex work of the counseling interview. Although there are “various ways to conceptualize the process of knowing, or epistemology, as it applies to the counseling situation” (Hansen, 2004, p. 131), our conceptual bias is toward the developmental perspective. Although closely allied to cognitive developmental psychology, developmental epistemology takes as its specific focus how human meaning making evolves over time and in various environments (e.g., Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Kohlberg, 1984; Perry, 1970). We wondered whether the personal epistemological leanings of our counselor trainees who had problems conducting helping interviews effectively, in fact, limited their ability to weigh and choose helpful behaviors with clients.

We knew instructional methods had been developed (e.g., Knefelkamp, 1974; Sprinthall, 1994) that might trigger epistemological development in the very counselor trainees whom we found to have problems in the helping interview, so we were hopeful of eventually adjusting our teaching in ways that might be beneficial. All that was needed was some demonstration that personal epistemology did, in fact, affect behavior in the helping interview. Thus, we set about conducting a qualitative study of counselor trainees’ actual helping interviews. We sought—by analyzing thematic content from the interviews—to discover and describe any relationship between (a) a counselor’s propensity for a certain developmental-epistemological “position” (Perry, 1970) and (b) the same counselor’s behavior in a counseling interview.

Developmental Epistemology

Developmental epistemology can be defined as the study of how a person’s construction of knowledge and knowing evolves over the life span (Kegan, 1982). At least from the time of the generative work of Piaget (1954) and Kohlberg (1984),
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personal epistemology (i.e., a person’s logic about knowing) has been seen as a developmental (that is, an evolving) characteristic of individuals. Since the 1970s, a substantial literature on epistemological development in adulthood has emerged (e.g., Belenky et al., 1986; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Perry, 1970). Developmental theorists have proposed that such qualities as dogmatism, conformism, rigidity, and the like can be treated as dimensions of fundamental patterns of cognitive structuring in persons and not as isolated traits. With development, the cognitive structures change; they go through well-charted developmental levels that have been variously characterized as stages (Kohlberg, 1984; Piaget, 1954), positions (Perry, 1970), ways of knowing (Belenky et al., 1986), and orders of consciousness (Kegan, 1994).

Perry’s (1970) theory of intellectual and ethical development, generally called the Perry Scheme, provides a “map” for such development in adulthood. Perry proposed, based on his research with college students, that individuals can move from a more rigid or authoritarian position (dualism), through positions of multiplicity, to a pluralistic and context-sensitive position (relativism). For the dualist, truths are absolute and are known by authorities. In contrast, with movement into relativism, an individual becomes aware that a person must think for her- or himself and that knowledge is constructed in a community of such thinkers. It should be noted that these categories are “soft”; that is, although individuals may prefer one position, they may sometimes use reasoning from earlier positions as well as intimate a more advanced position (Creamer & Associates, 1990).

The Perry Scheme is particularly appropriate for a study of counselor characteristics. Strong relationships between relativism and such important counselor characteristics as empathy (Lovell, 1999a; Neukrug & McAluliffe, 1993), openness-mindedness (Neukrug & McAluliffe, 1993), and divergent thinking (Sweeney, 1996) have been shown. Given the relatively unstructured nature of counseling work, relativism is likely to be an important precondition for much of effective counseling. In fact, Cebik (1985), Granello and Hazler (1998), and Paisley and Benshoff (1998) have all urged counselor education to take a developmental turn, guided by the assumptions that relativism is required for the complex work of counseling and that epistemological development can be positively influenced in programs of counselor education; however, there have been mixed results in many of the studies of counselor development. For a positive example, using the Perry Scheme to disaggregate a sample of counseling master’s-degree students, Granello (2002) found a linear relationship between chronological level in the counseling program and Perry position. Another positive study (Duys & Hedstrom, 2000) found that a counselor basic skills course had an effect on cognitive complexity, one of the epistemological-developmental dimensions noted by Perry (Moore, 1989). In earlier work, though, ambiguous findings caused Borders and Fong (1989) and Fong, Borders, Ethington, and Pitts (1997) to declare that the evidence for the relationship between development and counseling effectiveness was inconclusive (Borders & Fong, 1989), and even puzzling (that is, contrary to expectations) in Fong et al.’s study. Given this uncertainty about the linkage between development and the work of the counselor, we took an inductive, discovery-oriented approach in this study toward gaining greater clarity. Our initial guiding research question was “What is the relationship between counselor trainees’ epistemologies and their interview behaviors?”

Method

It was the purpose of this study to discover relationships, if any, between counselor trainees’ personal epistemological levels and their behaviors in counseling interview sessions. Toward that end, we chose a qualitative method. Until now, studies of counselor development have, for the most part, been quantitative (e.g., Borders & Fong, 1989; Fong et al., 1997; Lovell, 1999a; Neukrug & McAluliffe, 1993). Qualitative studies, despite their power in testing hypotheses, in McLeod’s (2001) words, “miss the subtleties of process that shape [counseling] outcomes” (p. 190). The few extant qualitative studies have reported on skill development and personal change within a program (Hill, Charles, & Reed, 1981; Ralph, 1980) or within the career span (Skovholt & Rønnesset, 1992), but they were predicated on chronological variables and not on an assessment, a priori, of participants’ cognitive or epistemological levels.

We wished to complement the existing, mainly quantitative, research efforts on counselor cognitive development by producing rich, text-based qualitative data. A reason for doing qualitative research lies in its potential for application. Qualitative research should provide more accessible, or experience-near, descriptions of linkages between counselor characteristics (in this case personal epistemology) and counseling interview behavior. Thus, educators might more easily integrate such research discoveries into their teaching. It is difficult to apply quantitative research findings easily in daily practice (Gelso, 1985; Howard, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1992). By contrast, a major limitation of qualitative research lies in problems with generalizability (Patton, 1990). As a consequence of each method’s limits and power, the purposes and strengths of the qualitative and quantitative methods exist in tension with each other, with one more useful for generating hypotheses and the other for testing them; the results of the current study are, therefore, more easily integrated into practice than the results of a quantitative study but limited in their generalizability.

Participants

So that we could determine their epistemological development, all of the counselor trainees (N = 30) in two sections of the first author’s beginning course in counseling skills completed the Learning Environment Preferences inventory.
(LEP; Moore, 1989) during the first session of that course, that is, before instruction began. Using the qualitative research technique of stratified purposeful sampling (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1994), we chose to concentrate our inquiry on extreme cases, that is, on (a) 6 trainees who had the highest LEP scores for dualism and (b) 6 trainees who had the highest scores for relativism. Stratified purposeful sampling helps "develop insights into the characteristics of each type, as well as insights into the variations that exist across types" (Gall et al., 2003, p. 179). Because our theory-driven aim was to determine if there are differences in interview behaviors due to epistemology (dualists vs. relativists), such selection of extreme cases promised to "maximize opportunities" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 186) to elicit qualitative data regarding the variation of interest.

The 12 counselor trainees who participated in this study ranged in age from 24 to 48 years. The dualists' ages (M = 28.00, SD = 5.10) did not differ significantly from the ages of the relativists (M = 28.67, SD = 9.50), t = 0.15, p = .88. Eleven participants were women and 1 was a man, a ratio that is typical of master's-degree programs in counseling. Nine participants were White, and 3 were Black. Consent was received from all participants.

Instrumentation

The LEP was used to identify the counselor trainees' preferences regarding the four Perry positions (i.e., dualism, early multiplicity, late multiplicity, and relativism) that are now considered most salient in adult epistemological development. The LEP measures epistemological development by asking the participant to rate her or his preference on each of 65 items across five domains that are related to epistemology: (a) view of knowledge and course content, (b) role of the instructor, (c) role of the student and of peers in the classroom, (d) the classroom atmosphere, and (e) the role of evaluation. The items range from those indicating a strong reliance on external authority (dualism) to recognition of the creation of knowledge by human communities (relativism). Participants rate each item from 1 (not at all significant) to 5 (very significant). The resulting raw scores are then processed to produce four position preference scores, which determine a respondent's differential preference for the four positions. Using the qualitative research technique of stratified purposeful sampling, we identified 12 extreme cases by selecting the highest scoring participants, 6 each, on the respective LEP subscores for dualism and relativism. For dualists, knowledge is viewed as outside of oneself, and one's role in learning is seen as that of a receiver of knowledge from authorities. (At the intermediary multiplicity positions, individuals retain an allegiance to the possibility of finding essential truth outside of human dialogue; however, they have doubts about finding such truth and consequently they experience frustration over the seeming arbitrariness of the multiple perspectives available.) Upon arriving at the position called relativism, individuals experience an epistemological breakthrough. It involves "a radical re-perception of knowledge" (Perry, 1970, p. 109), in which persons recognize that humans work together to construct knowledge rather than relying solely on authorities for knowledge. They embrace the human creation of meanings and the ongoing search for evidence.

Moore (1989) found the internal consistency alpha scores of the LEP to range from .72 to .84 for each position across all five domains and test–retest reliability to run as high as .89. Both concurrent validity and construct validity of the LEP have been established (Moore, 1989). For example, the LEP showed a correlation of .36 with the Measure of Epistemological Reasoning (Baxter-Magolda & Porterfield, 1985), a parallel measure of the Perry Scheme. Moore tested construct validity for the LEP by showing upward hierarchical progression in the four positions over time and with increasing education. He also found there to be strong correlations between Perry positions and other related constructs.

The Counseling Skills Course

The counselor trainees who participated in this study had completed the first half of a three-credit graduate course in which they were taught the microskills (Ivey & Ivey, 2003) approach to empathic listening before they conducted the specific helping interviews that were the target of our study. By midcourse, which was when the research-targeted interviews were completed, they had experienced the so-called "active listening" skills of nonverbal attending, paraphrasing, reflection of feeling, and questioning. They had tried out these skills in various practice interview contexts, including both role-played ones and ones in which real problems and issues were explored. The interviews we used for our qualitative analyses were of the latter kind (i.e., real-life, not role-played, interviews); for these interviews, trainees recruited practice clients from class or from their home milieu. The taped interviews, approximately 30 minutes in length, were then transcribed; these transcriptions, along with the trainees' written self-commentaries, were subsequently used for thematic analyses.

Data Collection and Analysis

The overall analytic process followed a generic qualitative approach, as described by McLeod (2001). Recent guidelines (Choudhuri, Glauser, & Peregoy, 2004) from the Journal of Counseling & Development for qualitative counseling research helped in structuring the investigation. The specific method consisted of inductive analysis (Patton, 1990), with code-to-theme protocols adapted from the grounded theory method of Strauss and Corbin (1990) and from Skovholt and Rønnestad's (1992) "modified ‘constant comparative’" (p. 153) process. In this vein, three researchers, one of whom was the first author of this article, analyzed the
student interviews and commentaries and separately coded them first into ideas (which were called "initial field notes"); then into initial codes; then into subthemes; and, finally, into broader, more inclusive themes. The researchers achieved consensus at each level. Data that did not fit into the themes were noted and retained. The first author then assigned names to the final themes that the researchers had culled and created definitions for each by reviewing the data. The first author then compared the separate themes for dualists and relativists and subsumed the pairs of themes into five overall categories of counselor interview functioning. In order to increase the trustworthiness of the possible discoveries from this study, an adaptation of the consensual qualitative method (Hill, Thompson, & Nutt-Williams, 1997) was used. An advanced graduate student conducted an audit of the data analysis and of the logic and evidence for the themes and provided a written report.

Possible Sources of Researcher Bias
The principal researcher (the first author), already "theory sensitive" at the time of the analysis, was familiar with the relationship between development and other attributes of individuals. This type of knowledge on the researcher's part is common in qualitative research and can actually be an asset at stages of the research (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) as long as it is acknowledged and accounted for when appropriate. The researchers controlled for this theory sensitivity by (a) not knowing either the identity of the trainees or their Perry position at the time of the initial analysis, (b) having two other researchers conduct independent initial analyses of interview transcripts, and (c) asking two additional researchers to cluster the initial notes into themes "blind," that is, unaware of whether they were naming themes for dualists or relativists.

Results
The three researchers identified five overall categories that characterized most of these counselor trainees' interview behaviors, namely, source of point of view, depth, reflectiveness, relationship to ambiguity, and use of evidence. For each of these categories, they named two themes, one for dualists and one for relativists (see Table 1); the first author was influenced by the literature on wisdom (e.g., Hanna & Ottens, 1995) in naming some of the themes. It should be noted that there were exceptions to these themes for each group, although the exceptions were rare. Following are the results in the form of (a) broad categories of counselor interview behavior, (b) the specific themes and definitions that were named for dualists and relativists, and (c) representative illustrations of those themes. For space reasons, the illustrations are limited to segments; these examples are, of course, part of longer segments that offer a fuller picture of the epistemologies. Our comments on the examples are in brackets.

Table 1: Categories of Counselor Functioning and Separate Themes for Dualists and Relativists

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Counselor Functioning</th>
<th>Separate Themes for Dualists and Relativists</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Source of point of view</td>
<td>Conflating points of view/externality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Depth</td>
<td>Superficiality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflectiveness</td>
<td>Automatization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship to ambiguity</td>
<td>Reductionism/premature closure</td>
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<td>Use of evidence</td>
<td>Unconsidered action</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Empathic decenteredness</td>
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<td>Perspicacity</td>
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<td>Metacognition</td>
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<td>Tolerance of ambiguity</td>
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<td>Deliberated action</td>
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Example of Theme 1 for dualists: Client: “I’m still angry about my parents’ divorce after all these years.” Counselor: “It’s OK to feel anger [authority]. I’m angry about my parents’ divorce still too” [own perspective].

Example of Theme 1 for relativists. Counselor (to client who is weighing her own impulsive need to purchase a particular house with her husband’s deliberateness): “You’re trying to balance getting the first house you see . . . but on the other hand . . . not put all your eggs in one basket . . . Yoûr heart is set on this one, but you are worried about your husband’s view, and you think his deliberateness might be wise.” [Note that here the relativistic counselor “decenters” from the client’s point of view—not being swept up in either her enthusiasm nor in the client’s worry about her husband’s satisfaction. Thus, the client is helped to hear her own “voice” as well as her husband’s wants.]
Category 2: Depth

**Theme 2 for dualists: Superficiality.** Definition: Orientation toward the "surface" of client experience; focus on specific persons, places, or things that the client has mentioned. There is an inability to probe for mixed feelings, implicit emotions or meanings, and/or patterns in client behavior.

*Example of Theme 2 for dualists.* Client: "The reason I am angry, I guess, is because I feel like the real truth wasn't told by my parents—they were sick of the marriage and it just wasn't working out. I'm also worried that it could happen to me." Counselor: "So you feel confused?" [missing the key concerns in favor of a superficial acknowledgment of mere confusion].

**Theme 2 for relativists: Perspicacity.** Definition: "Seeing through"; flexible application of the ability to use concrete, momentary cues to uncover cross-situational client themes; characterized by subtlety and use of metaphor.

*Example of Theme 2 for relativists.* Client: "My husband is very supportive... We just got married in July and then I went back to school in August... here he takes me on and he is paying all of my school bills and supporting me. There are things out there that he wants... a dirt bike and a boat." Counselor: "I sense some guilt [implicit feeling] about even going (to pursue a second master's degree) right now. Am I off?" Client: No you are not. I agree with that.

Category 3: Reflectiveness

**Theme 3 for dualists: Automatization.** Definition: Tendency toward habitual, automatic modes of thought and action; inclination to emit decontextualized utterances; inability to give considered evidence for thought and action; rote application of skills without evidence from current data; conventionality.

*Example of Theme 3 for dualists.* Client, regarding his teenage daughter: "Great head on her shoulders, courteous to everybody. Just your typical kid, though, when it comes to stuff at home and how they deal with parents. Sometimes I'd like to slap her around. High maintenance kid." Counselor: "Does she have problems at school?" [This is a decontextualized response with no rationale in the written commentary. Counselor is not responding in an intentional fashion to key concerns. Similar closed questions are repeated throughout interview.]

**Theme 3 for relativists: Metacognition.** Definition: Interest in and ability to think about one's thinking, to probe personal meanings and motivations; capacity to critique one's work and to consider alternate helping strategies.

*Example of Theme 3 for relativists.* Counselor to client (to woman whose husband has taken a job in a location that is far from their home, necessitating his having a separate weekday apartment): "Well, what does he want you to do?" The first question was followed by "Who else have you talked to?" "What would make you feel better?" "How would you feel if he . . . came home? Is that an option?" and "Have you considered just . . . giving it a trial run?" [interrogation illustrates premature drive toward solution.]

Category 4: Relationship to Ambiguity

**Theme 4 for dualists: Reductionism/premature closure.** Definition: Inclination to act in search of a single explanation; tendency to take only one perspective on human concerns, to seek a "right" answer to human problems.

*Example of Theme 4 for dualists.* Client: "My brothers and sisters have gotten over my parents’ divorce, but I can't." Counselor: "People who have this trouble are afraid of it happening to them" [simplistic reduction to one universal cause without exploring the feelings and meanings related to the issue]. "You need to tell yourself that it doesn't have to happen to you" [applies single approach to complex problem].

**Theme 4 for relativists: Tolerance for ambiguity.** Definition: Recognition that uncertainty is pervasive, that many perspectives are possible, and that pausing to gather evidence is needed before one draws conclusions.

*Example of Theme 4 for relativists.* Counselor to client who is deliberating the conflictual consequences of choosing between a musical career and a potential marriage: "You said 'scary.' Could you describe it to me, what you mean by 'scary'?" [interested in exploring client meanings]. After the client responded, the counselor said, "A year or two ago, you would have dropped everything for the music. Now you've got this new relationship and it's throwing a cog into the works" [stays with the uncertainty; holds the dilemma out for client to examine].

Category 5: Use of Evidence

**Theme 5 for dualists: Unconsidered action.** Definition: Disinclination to explore possibilities in favor of acting without considered evidence for actions.

*Example of Theme 5 for dualists.* Counselor to woman whose husband has taken a job in a location that is far from their home, necessitating his having a separate weekday apartment): "Well, what does he want you to do?" The first question was followed by "Who else have you talked to?" "Well, um, have you considered moving up there?" "What would make you feel better?" "How would you feel if he . . . came home? Is that an option?" and "Have you considered just . . . giving it a trial run?" [interrogation illustrates premature drive toward solution.]

**Theme 5 for relativists: Deliberated action.** Definition: Interest in and ability to act based on weighing of evidence, ability to name reasons for intervention, ability to offer evidence for actions and views.

*Example of Theme 5 for relativists.* (The following client seems to have reached temporary peace about pursuing a music career despite complications for his primary relation-
ship, but the counselor intentionally opens up new territory for exploration.) Counselor: "But you've said that your fiancée doesn't know if she could handle it if you got that break." (Client then proceeds to weigh his fiancée's traveling with him versus his being on extended absences.) Counselor commentary: "I thought that he seemed too pat with his solution, so I brought in a previous comment that challenged him to look at the realism of his plan." [Here the counselor has a rationale and a conception of the client's conflicting needs. Client can now pause to weigh conflicting needs and anticipate conflict in the relationship.]

Discussion

The distinctions between dualists’ and relativists’ counseling behaviors in this study are consistent with general notions from adult developmental theory. In addition, beyond such general connections, we have found linkages between developmental epistemology and effective counseling behavior. In that vein, we have tentatively made practical suggestions for the developmental teaching of counseling.

Parallels to Cognitive Development

All five of the counseling-related themes are consistent with the global characteristics named by Perry (1970), and later by Belenky et al. (1986), for dualism.

Dualistic counselors. Trainees who scored high on dualism in this study showed a tendency toward a conventional-maintaining, unquestioning belief that there were single truths known by authorities. For example, in Category 1, source of point of view, dualists' conflating points of view and externality (Theme 1) in the counseling interview were consistent with their general tendency to receive knowledge passively from authorities. In both Perry's overall theory and in the case of these trainees, a dualist cannot establish an autonomous point of view and instead relies on others in the form of people and texts for his or her point of view. In the area of depth (Category 2), dualists' superficiality in the interviews (Theme 2) was consistent with Perry's description of dualists' general beliefs in concrete, absolute, obvious truths. Such attention to the surface militates against the dualistic counselor's ability to probe for exceptions and underlying dimensions of phenomena. In the area of reflectiveness (Category 3), the general dualistic reliance on external convention for action was demonstrated in dualistic counselors' Theme 3, automatization. They could only replicate the "skills" that they have been taught (by the authorities) in a mechanical manner. Fourth, in the area of relationship to ambiguity (Category 4), dualistic trainees' reductionism/premature closure was consistent with their belief in "one right answer," in that exploration of alternate possibilities is not seen as fruitful. Finally, in Category 5, use of evidence, dualistic participants' unconsidered action in the interviews expressed the overall nondeliberative, even impulsive, manner in which dualists take action, because authority can dictate the "right" solution and they had no inclination to search for multiple perspectives and evidence.

Relativistic counselors. In similar fashion, the relativist themes for the counselors also corresponded to Perry's (1970) overall positions. For example, Perry described the relativist's capacity for a kind of detachment grounded in an awareness of the tentative nature of assumptions behind judgments and of the temporary context of any declaration. Empathic decenteredness (in Category 1, source of point of view) partially represented an ability to detach from one's own point of view while being simultaneously attentive to another's point of view. Relativistic trainees' depth, which we identified as perspicacity, was also characteristic of relativism in general. In Belenky et al.'s (1986) words, for relativists, "Truth lies hidden beneath the surface" (p. 94), requiring one to "really look" and "look hard" (p. 94) for understanding. The third characteristic of these relativistic trainees, metacognition, corresponded to Perry's capacity for detachment, the ability to "stand back" (p. 140). In his original study, Perry quoted a representative relativist, who simply declared, "I'm more aware of what I'm doing" (p. 141). According to Belenky et al., that awareness allows the relativist to consider his or her assumptions, to have a critical inner voice. The fourth category that emerged from this study, relationship to ambiguity, evokes a hallmark of relativistic thinking. In Perry's words, relativists appreciate the "plurality of contexts" (p. 140) for all judgments, a plurality that is the shifting ground for knowing. Their recognition of complexity brought with it patience in the form of the ability to "wait for meanings to emerge" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 98), that is, a tolerance for ambiguity instead of the dualistic impatience for structure. Finally, in the fifth category, use of evidence, relativists expressed what Perry called the balance between "contemplative awareness and action" (p. 178). We characterized relativistic trainees as being able to take deliberate action, or, in Perry's words, to "act in an examined ... life" (p. 151). Relativists generally applied reasoned reflection before taking action in a world of many contexts.

These parallels suggest that the counselor trainees in this study were making counseling decisions from a broad epistemological framework, either that of general dualism or relativism. We have concluded that this framework, that is, personal epistemology, is itself a cogent factor in counselor trainees' counseling decisions.

Parallels to the Literature on Counseling Effectiveness

A number of the relativists' behaviors were related to the behaviors that are required for effectiveness as a counselor. In Wampold's (2001) extensive review of the counseling effectiveness literature, he named a number of key characteristics of effective counseling. Wampold's first characteristic was empathy, which is the first theme found in this study. In addition, Wampold, identifying the importance of "work-
ing through one’s own issues” and “being self-reflective about one’s work” (p. 230), seems to draw on Theme 3, that is, the relativists’ metacognitive abilities to step back from personal meanings and motivations. Finally, Wampold’s specifying of “understanding and conceptualizing interpersonal and intrapsychic dynamics” (p. 230) as a key factor in counselor effectiveness echoes the relativists’ perspicacity, as seen in their ability to note the subtle cues that went beyond the overt content expressed by clients.

Thus, three of the five characteristics seen in relativists’ interviews have a strong relationship to those found by Wampold (2001) to be critical for effective counseling. It is at least these three (i.e., empathic decenteredness, perspicacity, and metacognition) that might, therefore, be more confidently targeted in developmentally oriented counselor education.

Implications for Teaching and Supervision Practice

These parallels between the discoveries of this study and previous meta-analyses of counseling effectiveness (e.g., Wampold, 2001) support a shift toward “developmentalizing” aspects of counselor preparation. It should be noted, again, that the exploratory, qualitative nature of this current study does not offer external validity and therefore necessarily limits the generalizations that can be made regarding the overall training of counselors. Mindful of that proviso, we nevertheless propose interventions that might be considered to encourage dualists to shift their fundamental ways of knowing. The impact of such interventions should be studied in future research.

The focus here on intervening with dualists rather than on relativists is founded on our initial research interest in those students’ difficulties in learning counseling skills and on what we see as the ethical imperative to help dualists shift away from externality, superficiality, automatization, reductionism, and unconsidered action in their counseling work. These inclinations can do harm to clients—or at least fail to promote good. Further research will be needed to confirm such discoveries.

Developmental instruction. There is strong evidence that intentional developmental education has a powerful impact (Sprinthall, 1994). The broad aim of developmental instruction is to expand students’ cognitive frameworks for knowing. From this perspective, epistemology, or how a person comes to know, is a central target of education. Developmentalists propose that expanding students’ available cognitive frameworks will increase their capacities across a variety of content areas (Knefelkamp, 1974; Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972). Developmental thinkers recommend three general pedagogical strategies. First, readiness, in the form of epistemological assessment (e.g., of dualism), should be determined early in a program or class. Second, intentionally developmental interventions should be implemented, following guidelines laid out by several counseling curriculum theorists (Cebik, 1985; Granello & Hazler, 1998; Lovell & McAuliffe, 1997; McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2000; Paisley & Benshoff, 1998). Third, developmental and effectiveness gains should be evaluated.

Encouraging movement from dualism toward relativism. Given the findings of the current study, we propose that an initial effort be made to assist dualistic students to expand their epistemological perspectives. Of course, these exploratory findings must be confirmed and extended before such changes in counselor education are confidently implemented. Instructors might first attempt to encourage dualistic students to expand their ways of knowing in the five categories that were identified in the interviews: source of point of view, depth, reflectiveness, tolerance for ambiguity, and use of evidence. For dualistic trainees, acquiring characteristics of the relativists is a desirable outcome. Thus, we propose that educators aim to help dualistic trainees become more empathic and decentered, perspicacious, metacognitive, tolerant of ambiguity, and deliberative in their actions.

A general guide for instigating developmental change in dualists has been offered by Cooper and Lewis (1983). Their notions can be summarized through the following four points:

- Put students into encounters with diversity.
- Require them to take on alternative perspectives (e.g., to think from different theoretical points of view).
- Convey the contextual roots of various counseling perspectives, including originators’ biographies and historical, political, and ethnic contexts.
- Have them question the assumptions on which they operate.

Each of these guidelines challenges dualists to reconsider their implicit belief that truth lies outside of social and historical circumstances (Rorty, 1989). We have extended these general notions with the specific instructional suggestions that follow.

Examples of development-stimulating instruction for dualists. Kegan (1982), Knefelkamp (1974), and Sprinthall (1994), among others, have laid out guidelines for development-enhancing educational environments. Each emphasized the dual notions of support and challenge (Sanford, 1962) as necessary conditions for positive developmental change. Each has shown that both support of a current epistemology and challenge to that way of thinking are necessary for growth. Knefelkamp proposed that four pedagogical dimensions (namely, degree of structure, personalism, concreteness, and experience) be varied, depending on students’ developmental needs. For example, dualists benefit from greater structure in classroom directions, assignments, and topic sequencing. Similarly, although all learners benefit from direct experience, dualists have a greater need for illustrations and action in order to make sense of theory. In Table 2, examples of sup-
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TABLE 2
Suggested Supportive Instructional Interventions for Dualistic Trainees

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<tr>
<th>Dualists’ Interview Theme</th>
<th>Supportive Instructional Interventions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conflicting points of view/externality</td>
<td>Recognize a student's interest in others' welfare and praise that concern.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superficiality</td>
<td>Give concrete illustrations and &quot;rules&quot; for use of skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automatization</td>
<td>Provide clear guidelines for typical situations in which certain skills might be applied (e.g., for crisis work).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reductionism/premature closure</td>
<td>Honor the need for quick decisions under certain circumstances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unconsidered action</td>
<td>Recognize the ultimate value of action in personal change.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Limitations

Qualitative researchers must be especially alert to issues of external validity (Patton, 1990). In that regard, it should be recognized that the results of this study cannot be generalized beyond the 12 trainees who participated. Nevertheless, these findings are intriguing, because they parallel quantitative research findings on the relationship between epistemology and counselor characteristics (e.g., Benack, 1988; Lovell, 1999a; Neukrug & McAuliffe, 1993). We hope that these findings will encourage future attempts at developmental counselor education. A qualitative investigation of the relationship between trainee epistemology and counselor interview behavior, perhaps as measured by an “objective” measure of such behavior (e.g., Downing, Smaby, & Maddux, 1999; Myrick & Kelly, 1971), seems warranted.

Another limitation of this study is that not all trainees' behaviors in the interviews fell neatly into the dualistic and relativistic themes. For example, sometimes dualists did make effective reflective responses, albeit mostly concrete and obvious ones. In a similar fashion, dualists occasionally seemed to demonstrate a kind of perspicacity via insights into nonobvious aspects of clients' worlds. In the six interviews of the dualists, however, there were only 5 initial field notes, out of a total of approximately 150, that represented such “advanced” themes, and 2 of the dualistic trainees, out of 6, actually accounted for all 5 of those field notes. In parallel fashion, some of the relativistic counselors also exhibited occasional dualistic-type behaviors.

Future Research

Some of the following would extend and deepen the current research. First, dualists' longitudinal progress from the midterm to the final interviews of the course might be plotted. In that way, as Lovell (1999b) has proposed, researchers might note any movement toward relativism that could be due to further learning from the counseling skills course. Second, researchers might study those students whose epistemologies lie between the two extremes of dualism and relativism. The midway positions in the Perry Scheme, called early multiplicity and late multiplicity (Moore, 1989), actually characterize the majority of graduate counseling students (Lovell,
A third area for future research is that of longitudinal change during a whole program of study. Findings in this area have so far been mixed (e.g., Fong et al., 1997). A fourth potentially important research direction lies in studying other possible characteristics that might distinguish dualists and relativists, such as multicultural awareness, approaches to diagnostic labeling, and the ability to handle clashes of values with clients.

Finally, studies of developmental interventions are called for at this time. Fong et al. (1997) proposed that researchers study intentional developmental counseling instruction. For example, a developmentally intentional counseling skills course (e.g., Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2001; Granello & Hazler, 1998; Griffith & Frieden, 2000) might be experimentally compared with a traditional course. The developmental course might intentionally aim at instigating dualists to change in the direction of increased empathic centeredness, perspicacity, metacognition, tolerance for ambiguity, and deliberated action.

## Conclusion

Rogers's (1951) original finding that the personal characteristics of the counselor are crucial for positive client change continues to gain support in the literature (Wampold, 2001). We chose to explore the epistemological characteristics of counselor trainees in this study because we have observed that some counseling students have difficulty learning the complex skills and sensitivities that are required for the work. The five themes that we observed for dualists and relativists offer a beginning map for a new epistemological-developmental counselor education, because instructors might target each of those five areas for learning. The developmental dimension adds a vocabulary and set of expectations to traditional approaches to counselor education; thus, a learner-centered and experience-oriented pedagogy might be planned and evaluated on the developmental continuum.

## References


The Influence of Counselor Epistemology on the Helping Interview


