Intentional Supervision: Cultivating Critical Thinking in Case Conceptualization

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Abstract

Counselors in training are tasked with synthesizing knowledge and skills during field experiences, bringing previous course work and program learning into practice in these culminating experiences. These students often experience difficulty in mastering case conceptualization, a challenge which can continue into professional life. In order to address this challenge, four counselor educators have constructed a model of case conceptualization based on DeBono's (1995) six hats of critical thinking and expanded it to include counseling theories and multicultural/ethical concerns. This framework is utilized to intentionally challenge counselors-in-training to view cases through specific lenses assisting in holistic case conceptualization. Providing this clear framework for counselors-in-training and new professionals assists in increasing case conceptualization self-efficacy.

Keywords: case conceptualization, critical thinking, supervision

Cultivating Evaluation for Case Conceptualization: Expanding on a Critical Thinking Framework

Case conceptualization is widely recognized as a standard of practice, which assists counselors in connecting foundational knowledge and client presentation. There are discrepancies, however, between experienced and novice counselors' case conceptualization ability, with a negative correlation between low levels of conceptualization ability and experience (Ladany et al., 2001; Mayfield et al., 1999). The discrepancy seems to center around the data points to which counselors attend. More seasoned counselors can synthesize and integrate information, while less seasoned counselors become focused on one element, often the presenting issue. Hinkle and Dean (2017) indicated that the reason case conceptualization becomes a challenge for counselor trainees is that the following skills are required in the conceptualization process: "advanced cognitive complexity, reflection skills, and affective awareness" (p. 388).

Professional Identity Development and Case Conceptualization in Field Experiences

Professional identity development (PID) is defined as the "successful integration of personal attributes and professional training in the context of a professional community" (Gibson et al., 2010, pp. 23-24). As the field of counseling matures, it has emphasized the importance of developing a healthy professional identity among counselors-in-training (CITs) (Corey et al., 2011; Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2016). Subsequently, strong professional identity provides a sense of belonging, a frame of reference, and an allegiance to the profession (Pistole & Roberts, 2002), whereas a lack of professional identity may be a detriment to the provision of quality counseling services, particularly from novice practitioners (Studer, 2006). Many approaches to PID focus on cognitive and behavioral aspects of experiential learning, continuing training, and supervision

(Dong et al., 2017); however, the concept of self-efficacy is essential. For instance, several researchers noted the impact of self-efficacy development throughout training programs (i.e., from new student orientation to clinical practicum orientation) and during critical training periods, such as practicum and internship (Lent et al., 2009; Mullen & Uwamahoro, 2015).

Although CACREP-accredited counselor training programs provide courses on the core CACREP competencies, it is not until practicum and internship when students must integrate each component into a coherent schema (Morran et al., 1995). Further, it is typically this time in students' training where novice CITs experience acute performance anxiety and scrutiny from professional gatekeepers, coupled with glamorized expectations, rigid emotional boundaries, and inadequate conceptual skills (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003). Therefore, this model seeks to understand better the findings that demonstrate strong self-efficacy growth within practicum and internship field experiences (Daniels & Larson, 2001; Barbee et al., 2003; Lent et al., 2009).

Self-Efficacy

Lent (2016) stated "self-efficacy refers to our beliefs about our abilities to perform specific behaviors or courses of action. It addresses the fundamental question, 'Can I do this?' " (p. 577). Bandura (1994) proposed four primary influences of self-efficacy: 1) mastery experiences; 2) vicarious experiences provided by social models; 3) social persuasion; and 4) reducing stress reactions and altering negative emotional proclivities. Regarding mastery experiences, robust self-efficacy develops through personal successes and is undermined by real or perceived personal failures. In other words, robust self-efficacy requires overcoming obstacles. As people learn that they have the competence to succeed they are more likely to persevere during future adversity. In the context of this model, a mastery experience can occur during a supervision session in which a CIT receives positive feedback from peers and an

instructor, thus developing a sense of accomplishment. Cheung (2015) noted the cyclical nature of self-efficacy beliefs noting self-efficacy beliefs influence achievement, and then achievement reinforces and enhances self-efficacy beliefs, which continues to influence achievements. Thus, self-efficacy beliefs have a mediating effect on past academic outcomes.

Self-efficacy also develops through vicarious observation of those around us and is strongly influenced by how similar one perceives oneself compared to the other person (Bandura, 1994). As with mastery experiences, observing people like us overcome obstacles enhances self-efficacy, while watching others' failure lowers perceived self-efficacy. If people see their models as being much different from them, others' failures are less likely to impact one's perceived self-efficacy negatively. A practicum or internship student may develop self-efficacy while observing another student navigate a challenge case. Cheung (2015) postulated that the effect of efficacy enhancing teaching on self-efficacy beliefs is mediated by student's learning strategies.

The research regarding sources of self-efficacy has been inconsistent, with only mastery experiences being consistently reported as a significant predictor of self-efficacy beliefs (Usher & Pajares, 2006, Usher & Pajares, 2009; Usher, 2009). However, research consistently indicates that social persuasion (i.e., the deliberate encouragement from others than an individual has the competence to master a given task (Bandura, 1994)), is a more powerful predictor of self-efficacy beliefs for females than males. Additionally, social persuasion appears to be more influential in African American students than in Caucasian students (Usher & Pajares, 2006, Usher & Pajares, 2008; Usher, 2009). Providing positive-based, supportive instruction may promote self-efficacy (Chung et al., 1997), thus alluding to a relationship-based factor that contributes to CIT self-efficacy. For instance, clinicians are more likely to believe in their efficacy with clients when they feel their supervisors believe they can work well with particular

clients (Morrison & Lent, 2018). Therefore, is important to understand the role that field experience, such as practicum and internship, plays in counselor development, especially since research demonstrates that counseling self-efficacy improves over these specific training experiences (Ikonomopoulos et al., 2016).

Field Experience

Critical incident research focuses on events in training programs that are catalysts for change (Heppner & Roehlke, 1984). These critical incidents, per practicum students, involve experiences that promote the development of competence, emotional awareness, and perceived support. Doctoral students cited therapy and supervision experiences and the processing of transference and countertransference from sessions as critical incidents. From a cognitive perspective, it is within these training periods (i.e., practicum and internship courses) when CITs progress from factual to procedural knowledge and start development a "counselor schema" for case conceptualization (Morran et al., 1995). Similarly, Morran et al. (1995) found that students' attitudes impact perceived self-efficacy, confidence, and their ability to form a therapeutic alliance with clients. Developmentally, increased student autonomy increased with clinical supervision and self-confidence related to counseling skills came only after clinical fieldwork (Fong & Borders, 1997). Similarly, more frequent counseling experiences lead to higher self-estimates of counseling abilities (Stoltenberg, 1998). Chung et al. (1997) found that supervisees prefer supportive, instructional, and interpretive supervisors, while interactions with faculty were viewed as the most meaningful aspect of a counseling program.

When changes in counselor self-efficacy beliefs during training were examined, it was found that, within 8-week intervals, self-efficacy increased at a statistically significant rate (Kozina et al., 2010). However, the authors noted a small sample size, which cautioned data

interpretation. Despite that fact, data suggested that self-efficacy beliefs can change within a short (i.e., 8-week) time period. Further, Goreczny et al. (2015) conducted a multivariate analysis of variance to explore self-efficacy across academic training. They found that self-efficacy increased among students in progressively more advanced courses and training experiences. Specifically, CITs exhibited an approach-avoidance conflict, where they are excited about entering these new experiences but feel anxious due to the newness of the experiential nature of it.

In a study examining developmental narratives of CITs, Storlie et al. (2016) discovered four themes that promote counselor development: 1) counseling without training wheels; 2) the relationship is key; 3) changing populations; and 4) new ethical challenges. The authors also found seven subthemes: 1) real clients with real diagnoses; 2) my new responsibilities; 3) client-counselor relationship; 4) inter-supervisor relationship; 5) face diversity and biases; 6) children and families; and 7) addiction and poverty. These findings support the notion that hands-on experiences are essential to CITs professional development (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014). Intentionality was also identified as a critical component for CITs. One qualitative study focused on how mindfulness influences CITs' professional identity development illustrated that this professional development occurs as a continuum rather than as single critical events (Dong et al., 2017). This finding suggests that counselor development is a combination of training experiences versus single transformational tasks.

Case Conceptualization

Case conceptualization is a critical skill related to counselor development, treatment planning, and overall implementation of best practice. Specifically, it is the process of evaluating, assessing, and synthesizing the comprehensive nature of clients' presenting problems

to inform treatment (Schwitzer & Rubin, 2012). Unfortunately, this is often a skill that is difficult for counselors-in-training to develop. Towards this end, many scholars agree that case conceptualization skill development often requires students' expanded cognitive complexity (Granello & Underfer-Babalis, 2004) and inclusion of creative techniques, such as role-plays, to enhance case conceptualization skills (Hinkle & Dean, 2017). Overall, a structured, intentional effort to improve case conceptualization skills is warranted.

Purpose of a Model

Counseling and supervision are complex processes that often require the integration of knowledge, experience, and skill to successfully navigate them. Much like counseling requires a theoretical orientation, supervision also necessitates a model through which to approach the provision of feedback. Having a model to accomplish this task allows for the transformation of old cognitive, behavioral, and affective patterns into new ones (Dewey, 1909), buffers against judgement and biases (De Bono, 1995), and helps frame an experience through different perspectives (Ashby, 2006).

The Six Thinking Hats

To facilitate case conceptualization and critical thinking skills for supervision of CITs, the researchers have adopted the six thinking hats model as first proposed by psychologist and university professor, Edward De Bono (1995). This model was originally developed to facilitate critical thinking within the business world. However, it has been adapted to find application for nursing (Karadag et al., 2009), gender studies (Hittner & Daniels, 2002), human resources analysis (Patre, 2016), marital counseling (Li et al., 2002), and education (Al Jarrah, 2019; Chien, 2020; Gill-Simmen, 2020). Using the simple imagery of wearing different colored "hats"

to facilitate different types of thinking, this model overcomes many difficulties in critical thinking.

De Bono (1995) argued that several obstacles often occur in any attempt at critical or creative thinking either in a group or individually. First, he argued that emotions often get in the way by circumventing the thinking process. Too often, individuals allow their initial "gut reaction" or fear of judgement to prevent critical thinking (De Bono, 1995). Conversely, some individuals sometimes seek to present the most exotic idea and often miss the simple answer to a problem. Additionally, confusion leading to helplessness can be avoided through having a specific plan of how to think (De Bono, 1995). When there is no plan for how to think, especially when the issue needing thought is new, confusion can lead to giving up or withdrawal for individuals. One can begin to see the application to CITs in not just the provision of feedback but also teaching them to think critically regarding each unique client they encounter. The following details the types of thinking each hat facilitates in De Bono's original model.

White Hat

The white hat can be thought of as the information needed to provide the background of the problem or topic. It is considered a neutral hat and is generally used at the beginning of the thinking process. It is pure data collection and a historical account of what is currently known. The main purpose of the hat is to ask, "What do we know?" In application to counselor education and supervision of CITs, this hat would encompass a brief bio-psycho-social-spiritual overview of the client as well as where the CIT is in the counseling process and counselor-client relationship.

Yellow Hat

The yellow hat has its thinking focus on the positive and optimistic aspects of the problem or topic. This hat finds value in what has already happened while also looking to the benefits of the future. It addresses benefits, opportunities, advantages, and savings. The main question posed is, “What worked?” Application to supervision for CITs would be processing what went well in a session and what skills and interventions were beneficial. While a beneficial hat, there is danger of overutilization in peer supervision for fear of being too negative to fellow CITs.

Black Hat

The black hat as originally proposed by De Bono is the “logical negative” (De Bono, 1995). However, it is not adversarial or undesired thinking as it provides questions and checks to feasibility of ideas and proposed solutions. This hat entails judgement and questioning and identifies caution, dangers, and potential problems. The focused question is, “What are the difficulties and weaknesses?” While often avoided, this hat can be described as “a gatekeeper, not a dreambreaker” (Li et al., 2002). There is great value in this hat in application to CITs as it allows them to be focused on their judgement of themselves or others. Rather than over-focus or lack of focus on what needs to be improved, there is a targeted period to critically look at themselves and what could be improved upon in skills or what may have been missed in a session.

Red Hat

The red hat brings feelings and emotions into critical thinking as a necessary process. This hat legitimized hunches and gut reactions while exploring the fears, likes, intuitions, and expressions of views. The expression of feelings during this phase of thinking allows emotions to

be expressed without need to justify those positions through logic. The posed question is, “What are my gut feelings?” There are several ways to apply this hat for CITs. One application is to focus on the feeling experienced by the client and counselor within a session. While another application can focus on the emotions felt by observers of the CIT and client within a session. There can be great insights gained by focusing on emotions that may be missing in sessions as many CITs can be focused on thoughts of interventions and presentation of skills.

Green Hat

The green hat was originally the hat of creativity and new ideas. Alternatives, new information, and both spontaneous and intentional creativity are hallmarks of this type of thinking. The focused question of “How can we think and do this differently?” can facilitate free association and abstract thought processes. CITs can utilize this type of thinking to be creative and look for new interventions or even theoretical perspectives to entertain.

Blue Hat

The final hat can be the most difficult to understand and apply. The blue hat encompasses metacognition or thinking about thinking. The blue hat is often used at the end of the thinking process to summarize themes and suggest which hat may require more attention. Blue hat thinkers have been referred to as “orchestra conductors” who guide and balance the blending of the other five hats (Li et al., 2002). The focused questions are “What has been learned?” and “What is next?” CITs often struggle with this hat as it requires higher-order thinking. However, it can facilitate professional identity and elucidate what areas need further development.

Expanding the Model

The researchers used this model to increase critical thinking in practicum and internship counselors in training; however, there were two categories of case conceptualization missing: theory conceptualization and multicultural/ethical considerations. To supplement De Bono's six hats and adequately address core competencies of case conceptualization (Sperry, 2005), the researchers added two hats: the orange hat and the grey hat.

Orange Hat

The first of these two hats is the "theory hat", which has been identified as the orange hat. Research indicates the ultimate goal of case conceptualization is to bring theory into practice (Sperry, 2005). Further research indicates that bringing theory into practice is part of a competency-based model of counselor education (NCSPP, 2007). Betan and Binder (2010) noted that there may be unconscious integration of theory into practice; "theory that has been metabolized is a form of tacit knowledge that functions automatically and often outside of conscious awareness" (p. 144). The orange hat seeks to move theoretical considerations from unconscious to conscious and intentional awareness. As students metaphorically put the theories hat on, they are challenged to view cases only through a theoretical lens.

This theoretical lens is multifunctional, first being utilized to assess what theory is currently being used within a particular case presentation or client. Secondly, the hat is utilized to challenge students to intentionally think about what theory should be used in the given case. When utilizing this hat it is important for the supervisor to challenge the CIT to use evidence based practices, directing them to appropriate resources and research.

Grey Hat

Research shows that graduate students often feel unprepared to address cultural issues in clinical work (Brooks et al., 2004; Constantine & Gloria, 1999; Hertzsprung & Dobson, 2000; Ponterotto et al., 2002: Vereen et al., 2008). Therefore, supervisors and counselor educators are responsible for intentionally addressing cultural issues to increase cultural competence. The second of the proposed additional hats was originally conceptualized as two separate hats: Ethics and Diversity. However, when used separately in practice, there was a noticeable overlap of these considerations and CITs struggled to differentiate these topics at times. Therefore, these two hats were combined to include both ethical and cultural concerns, resulting in the Multicultural and Ethics hat.

Consistent with research (Watkins et al., 2019; Wilcoxon et al., 2008; Sue et al., 1982) this hat meets the ethical responsibility to address multicultural issues in counseling and case conceptualization. Watkins et al. (2019) stated "culture is inescapably in the room during every psychotherapy session" (p. 40). Therefore, counselors and counselor educators must deliberately address issues of culture to assist in overcoming the obstacles to approaching diversity topics (Inman, 2006; Lee & Tracey, 2008; Yabusaki, 2010).

As noted, researchers agree diversity and multicultural considerations are an important part of the counseling process, supervision, and case conceptualization (Inman, 2006; Lee & Tracey, 2008; Yabusaki, 2010; Betan & Binder, 2010; Sodowsky et al., 1994). This model challenges supervisors and supervisees to intentionally discuss issues of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, social status, ethics and other multicultural topics that are sometimes avoided in supervision out of fear (Inman, 2006; Lee & Tracey, 2008). Inman (2006) also reported the importance of tasks in supervision, including identification and explicit discussion of multicultural concerns. Inman and Kreider (2013), consistent with the research of Neufeldt et

al. (2006), expressed the multidimensional growth supervisees can experience by focusing on culture in supervision including multicultural knowledge, self-awareness, and skills.

Through utilizing these additional hats of case conceptualization, CITs are tasked with specifically and purposefully dissecting portions of case presentations during field experiences, thus providing a more holistic view of clients and cases. The final model consists of the following hats of supervision: Facts, Creativity, Growth Opportunities, Metacognition, Emotions, Strengths, Theory, and Multicultural/Ethics. Some changes were made to the hat colors for this model, as the researchers were concerned about multicultural implications. The main purpose was to change the "black" hat to "green" in order to avoid the assumption of negativity with the color black. Green represents growth and areas of improvement. The following image details the color changes to the hats within this model:

Applications for Counselor Educators and Supervisors

Counselor educators and supervisors have great influence on the counselor-in-training's development as a clinician, both in skill acquisition and clinical conceptualization of client cases.

Prieto and Scheel (2001) noted the need for scaffolding the case conceptualization skills of counselors-in-training through a cognitive-developmental approach. In their model, they suggested a strategic case documentation approach that focused on signs/symptoms, topics of discussion, intervention, progress/plan, and special issues (STIPS). Additionally, they indicated that supervisors needed to externally process through these areas to model integration and connection in this method of case conceptualization (Prieto & Scheel, 2001).

The eight hats model is similar to the STIPS model, albeit not focused on clinical documentation, in that it engages external processing through elements of case conceptualization. In the current thinking hats model, the elements of case conceptualization include the 'big picture,' the details, ethical considerations/theory, multicultural orientation, creativity, emotions, strengths, growth areas. In reviewing audio or video recordings and/or in processing clients, each of these hats can be worn to assist in putting smaller pieces together to create a comprehensive understanding. In group supervision, each member of the group can be assigned a hat to wear to allow intentional commentary after a peer presents a case. In individual supervision, the supervisor and supervisee can work together in co-wearing or independently wearing each hat. The hats can be worn to focus solely on the client, solely on the counselor, or a mixture of both. The intentionality of this type of supervisory processing allows for integration of counselor skill development, understanding of client dynamics, and advancement of clinical intervention.

Conclusion

Case conceptualization is a necessary counseling skill and is developed over time and experience. The necessary elements of solid case conceptualization include a comprehensive understanding of the client(s) and the client's world, along with what is happening

interpersonally in the counseling relationship and intrapersonally with the counselor. Utilizing a model that intentionally addresses the complexity of case conceptualization provides a robust framework for CITs and clinicians to use during field experiences and throughout their professional careers.

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