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Positive Psychology in Counselor Education: An Exploration of Leading Counselor Educators' Opinions

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Abstract

This article describes results of interviews conducted with nine prominent leaders in counselor education regarding their opinions about positive psychology research. Counselor education leaders provided in-depth responses to a series of questions about positive psychology and its potential relevance in the training of master's level counselors. The responses indicate that positive psychology is considered a significant new trend worthy of careful attention by counselor educators. Long-term pedagogical and philosophical implications for counselor education are discussed, as well as recommendations for further research.

The purpose of this study was to complete an initial exploration of counselor educators' opinions about the burgeoning field of positive psychology. Eighty-eight counselor educators responded to an online survey pertaining to three major aspects of

the positive psychology movement. The participants' responses pointed toward a consistent interest in training counseling students in studies related to positive subjective experiences, positive emotions, and positive communities and groups. Statistical analysis of the data revealed a significant discrepancy between counselor educators' current and ideal training practices regarding positive psychology, suggesting that theory and research in this field should be integrated into future counselor education training standards. Implications for the field of counselor education, and Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) standards in particular, are provided.

Since its inception, the counseling profession (along with counseling psychology) has had at its heart an orientation toward optimal functioning, normative development, and wellness (Gladding, 2004; Juntunen & Atkinson, 2002; Sweeney, 2001). Only recently have larger numbers of psychologists embraced the need to moderate what has been viewed as a myopic focus on psychopathology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and to apply the scientific method to the study of positive human development. The trend toward increasing emphasis on the scientific study of psychological well-being is evidenced by a meteoric rise of a movement in positive psychology over the last two decades, which is now a burgeoning research enterprise (Azar, 2011).

Although the term positive psychology defies precise definition, Gable and Haidt (2005) captured its essential meaning with their characterization that positive psychology is "the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions" (p. 104). And while positive psychology encompasses a broad range of topics including happiness, subjective well-being, and mindfulness, typical research areas have included the investigation of positive emotions, positive subjective experiences, and positive organizations (Schueller, 2009). Researchers in positive psychology have demonstrated its potential for increasing well-being in nonclinical populations, as well as for clinical efficacy in treatments of mental disorders such as depression (Schrunk, Brownell, Tylee, & Slade, 2014; Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). In their meta-analysis of 49 studies involving positive psychology interventions (PPIs), Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009) found that PPIs both increase well-being and ameliorate depression in non-clinical and clinical populations, calculating medium-sized effect sizes (mean $r = .29$ for well-being, mean $r = .31$ for depression).

In parallel with the rise of the movement in positive psychology, the field of counselor education has heightened attention toward core foundational elements of counseling practice (e.g., wellness, strengths-based counseling, and optimal functioning) as central to training programs in counseling (Witmer & Young, 1996; Yager & Tovar-Blank, 2007). For example, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs' (CACREP) increased consideration toward incorporating the construct of *wellness* into training programs is reflected in 12 separate references to wellness in the 2009 CACREP standards (CACREP, 2009), as opposed to a mere two references in the 2001 standards (CACREP, 2001). Additionally, the 2009 standards, referring to "optimal wellness and growth of the human spirit, mind, or body. . . optimal development and wellness over the life span" (p. 91) and "optimal human development" (p. 111), provide more confirmation that training programs in counseling are heightening

attention on elements that highlight conceptual convergence between shared theoretical bases in positive psychology and professional counseling.

Despite indications that some counseling practitioners are now examining the potential benefits of infusing positive psychology into the counseling profession (e.g., Harris, Thoreson, & Lopez, 2007; Park & Peterson, 2008), it does not appear that the voluminous body of positive psychology literature is gaining as rapid an entry into counseling literature as one might expect, given the exponential rate of growth in positive psychology research. Given that positive psychology appears to be in close alignment with key underlying notions in counseling practice, along with its demonstrated clinical utility, it would seem pragmatic to continue to examine the degree to which the empirical evidence from domains across positive psychology is informing the counseling profession and impacting the education of counselors. Toward that end, a recent national survey study (Kolodinsky et al., 2014) investigated counselor educators' opinions about major domains in positive psychology: positive subjective experiences, positive emotions, and positive communities (or groups).

Results from this study provide evidence that while educators are reasonably familiar with and highly value topics in positive psychology, there is also a significant discrepancy between ideal training practices and current training practices in each of the 18 positive psychology constructs surveyed. In other words, among counseling educators, there exists "the relatively deep chasm between what is currently being taught in counselor education and what ideally should be taught vis-a-vis positive psychology" (Kolodinsky et al., 2014, p. 10). In addition, the survey data also suggested that the majority of counselor educators believe that core concepts in positive psychology possess therapeutic and clinical utility and that theory and research in positive psychology should be integrated into counseling training programs and CACREP standards.

The current investigation seeks to validate and extend these findings and to probe more deeply into the meaning underlying the beliefs of counselor educators regarding positive psychology. Using a qualitative approach, several distinguished leaders in the field of counselor education were queried regarding their perceptions in order to determine if their views supported our previous findings (Kolodinsky et al., 2014) that counselor educators believe that positive psychology has clinical utility and should be integrated into counseling training curricula. An additional a priori objective of this study was to determine if any dominant themes would emerge from the data that might be useful in informing counselor educators of issues that would be germane toward the overall professional development of counselors and counselors-in-training.

Method

Participants

In late 2010, nine active counselor educators, all considered leaders in the field, were telephone-interviewed for this study. The sample of experts was selected using purposive sampling. A master list of 15 prominent counselor educators was developed by the first author and was then sent to three additional counselor educators from CACREP-accredited programs at three different universities—all assistant and associate professors—for additional informant list suggestions.

To qualify as a *leader*, we aimed for current or past presidents of the American Counseling Association (ACA), the Association for Counselor Education and

Supervision (ACES), and/or leadership within ACA Divisions, as well as prominent, nationally-known, long-time counselor educators who had extensive scholarly and clinical backgrounds in counseling. All 15 leaders were contacted by e-mail during 2010. In late 2010, after nine interviews were completed, we ceased any further attempts to gather data.

A review of each participant's curriculum vitae and professional Web site was conducted at the time of the interview. The leaders' educational and professional backgrounds indicated many years of involvement and experience in the counseling field. Each of the leaders possessed doctoral degrees in Counselor Education or Counseling Psychology, as well as master's degrees in Counseling or Psychology. Eight of the individuals held active licenses in Psychology or as Licensed Professional Counselors. Five of the individuals held the Nationally Certified Counselor credential, and four listed themselves as Nationally Certified Family Therapists. Taken together, this group has spent a significant amount of time providing applied/clinical experience in a variety of settings. The majority of the individuals were members of the American Counseling Association (ACA), the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES), and/or the American Psychological Association (APA), and three of whom have also been recognized as fellows. Together, this group has received a great deal of recognition and awards, with over 45 awards granted from APA and/or ACA. Three individuals are former ACA presidents, three others have served as presidents of ACES, and still others have held the role of president of other counseling associations at the state level. Two individuals have also acted as president of Chi Sigma Iota, a well-established international honor society of professional counseling. A number of the individuals have also served as board members or chairs for the American Association of Counseling and Development, the National Academy for Certified Family Therapy, ACA, and/or CACREP. All nine participants were currently working as professors and scholars at their respective counselor education institutions. Seven individuals have been editors of national journals, and several of the individuals in this group are well-published themselves, with a number of publications in the area of wellness and well-being.

Instrumentation for Interview of Leaders

The goal for the telephonic survey was to augment the data gathered from our previously-published online national survey of counselor educators with the insights of seasoned, long-time leaders in the field of counselor education. It was hoped that this mixed-methods approach would allow for expansion, triangulation, and complementarity of data in this inquiry, along the lines of Greene, Caracelli, and Graham's (1989) justification for combining quantitative and qualitative analysis.

A set of 12 qualitative questions was initially developed for this purpose, but after gathering input from the three counselor educators who had provided consultation for the online survey, the qualitative survey was reduced to five major themes, and further, to five questions. These five questions reflected prominent themes in positive psychology and the pedagogical aspects of teaching positive psychology in counselor education (see Appendix).

The telephonic survey involved questions that addressed the following five themes: (a) connotations of "positive psychology/psychotherapy"; (b) long-term relevance of instructing counselors-in-training in positive psychology research, as well as

benefits and challenges of training along these lines; (c) the distinction between the “standard clinical approach based on symptom relief versus the positive psychology approach which focuses on increasing positive emotion, engagement, and meaning”; (d) relevance of instructing counselors-in-training in positive psychology research related to positive subjective experiences, positive emotion research, and positive organizations, and; (e) opinions about the term “psychology—as in “positive psychology” being used within the context of counselor education.”

Procedure for Interview of Leaders

This study employed a mixed-methods design in order to gather detailed, specific information about positive psychology from as many counselor educators as possible and to augment that data with interview data gathered from long-time and prominent leaders in the field of counselor education. Fifteen prominent counselor educators from the list were contacted by e-mail, with eight initially agreeing to participate. A ninth leader was also contacted following the advice of one of the interviewees, and this last participant also agreed to be interviewed.

Interviewees were contacted again by telephone and e-mail, and dates for the interviews were arranged in 2010. The participants received an informed consent statement by e-mail, and after agreeing to that statement verbally, the interviews were conducted telephonically. Each interview was recorded with the permission of the interviewee, as stated in the informed consent statement.

Data Analysis for Interviews With Leaders

The recordings of participants’ responses to each of the five questions were extracted verbatim and subsequently classified via content analysis in a manner similar to Weber’s procedures (1990). In the initial phase of analysis, each interviewee’s responses to questions were broken down by three researchers into the smallest possible stand-alone units of meaning (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stemler, 2001). For example, if a question stimulated a one-sentence response, the researchers broke down that sentence into as many individualized units of meaning as possible so that each unit would represent a particular theme.

The first step involved categorizing their responses to each of the five questions. Since the open-ended questions led to responses that often transcended the confines of the questions themselves, the researchers decided to classify response themes not by question per se, but via a more organic process in line with guidelines for content analysis. In other words, once the narratives were broken down into the smallest possible content units, they were then organized into themes, regardless of which question each coded unit had emanated from originally. In step one of this analysis, these units were categorized organically and independently by two of the researchers and then reviewed in phase two by two additional researchers who carefully refined the phase one categories into a final set of themes.

Results

Several themes emerged from the content analysis of the counselor education leaders’ responses. What follows is a summary of these themes based on the prompting

questions themselves and emergent themes that seemed to transcend the questions themselves.

Towards a Working Definition of Positive Psychology

The leaders' working definition of positive psychology was construed somewhat broadly, though with thematic consistency as well. Several viewed positive psychology as "focusing on strengths" and on "positive emotions." Several also mentioned wellness as a synonymous construct to positive psychology. For instance, one leader mentioned that "positive psychology has to do with second order change and wellness, and not just ameliorating negative symptoms." From a counseling theories perspective, one mentioned positive psychology as having "Adlerian roots," while another envisioned its roots primarily in solution-focused therapy, and yet a third envisioned a "focus on existential issues. . . finding meaning and living life to its fullest." Several also mentioned the ways in which some of the ideals of counselor education such as social justice, prevention, advocacy, and altruism "fit nicely into positive psychology's ideals."

Positive Psychology in Counselor Education.

There was a consistent sentiment that positive psychology research is very substantial, important and "can't be ignored," and that it has important implications for the training of counselors and "can improve counseling." Several also mentioned that counselor education's very identity has its historical roots firmly planted in positive psychology: "It's already fused into counselor education through shared values and the focus on wellness, holism, and the mind-body connection," according to one participant, while another similarly spoke of it "being infused into counselor education through counseling's very identity," and that "it's already being taught in counselor education to some degree." The consistent theme among most leaders was that positive psychology is not only significant and worthy of attention, but that its main constructs are innate to the discipline of counseling.

Two leaders described counselor education as having "lost its way" and that counselor education has moved away from its identity and roots in positive psychology, in part because of perceived "barriers and challenges to teaching positive psychology" in today's behavioral health context. This "loss of identity" perception, some said, is due to the pressures of the "current financial realities" from medical model and managed care. Another referenced the "domination of the medical model making it challenging for positive psychology to gain a foothold because the focus in our training is always on psychopathology, symptom relief, the DSM, diagnoses, and insurance."

Psychology and Counselor Education: Strange Bedfellows?

Several mentioned a significant rift between the disciplines of psychology and counselor education, with most mentioning that that this schism is unfortunate and unhelpful. There was a consistent depiction of these two fields not working together optimally. One described published literature from counselor education "never making it into psychology journals," while counselor educators often reference research "from psychology journals in ACA journals." Others generally echoed this sentiment. One leader referenced that "psychologists have effectively laid claim to positive psychology and research in positive psychology," and that "they've done the hard research that we

should have been doing,” and thus, that “psychology deserves the credit for essentially co-opting the construct of positive psychology.” On the other hand, three different leaders referred to positive psychology research “lacking adequate support,” being characterized as having “gaps and shortcomings,” especially related to its applicability “in clinical settings.” One discussed that these “organizational schisms. . . make it difficult to more fully enact positive psychology, and are cumbersome in general.”

The Future of Positive Psychology in Counselor Education

There was a consistent description of optimism about the future of positive psychology as it relates to the training of counselors. One leader, for instance, stated that “further implementation and exploration of positive psychology will be important in counselor education. . . something is missing otherwise.” Another discussed that “there are promising and needed ways that positive psychology can be more fully implemented in counseling training.” Wellness and positive psychology “need to be further integrated into our field” according to yet another counselor educator, while one additional leader mentioned envisioning counselors-in-training as benefiting “from positive psychology in the realm of self-care.”

Implementation challenges include such sentiments as, “we counselor educators don’t walk the wellness and prevention talk, and we don’t train in those ways either.” One leader referenced counselor educators and psychotherapists having a propensity to lead relatively unhealthy “stressed out” lifestyles that leave incongruent impressions on counselors-in-training and on psychotherapists in general. Four leaders described that positive psychology can and perhaps should have its implementation limitations as summarized in this statement: “non-normal clients with severe problems may not respond well to positive psychology.”

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate and illuminate the perspectives held by a number of leading voices in the field of counselor education, specifically related to positive psychology as an arguably underemphasized component of counselor training. Although positive psychology closely aligns with the foundational elements of counseling in practice (e.g., wellness, strengths, and the promotion of optimal health), counselor educators have, for the most part, remained observers to the current momentum of positive psychology’s influence on the helping professions (see Kolodinsky et al., 2014). Furthermore, despite the growing attention on the feasibility (e.g., Fulmer, 2015, Huffman et al., 2014;) and clinical utility of positive psychology (e.g., Harris et al., 2007), counselor educators remain seemingly insulated, thus running the risk of neglecting the positive trend towards the integration of positive psychology in counselor education. In response to this phenomenon, the results of this study provide a deeper investigation into the perspectives held by the leaders of the field, thus substantiating the need for continued support for the increased integration of positive psychology into the practice of counselor education.

Results of this investigation included a number of macro-themes that informed the investigators’ understanding of perceptions of the role positive psychology has in counselor education, the beneficial aspects of further integrating positive psychology into

counselor education, and the barriers that exist in the process of increasing positive psychology practices in counselor education. Themes deduced from these interviews included (a) the task of defining positive psychology; (b) the importance of positive psychology and research pertaining to positive psychology in counselor education; (c) the current use of positive psychology in counselor education; (d) the need for redirection back to positive psychology as an integral aspect of counselor education; (e) the schism between psychology training and counselor education training; (f) opportunities for the integration of positive psychology in counselor education; (g) implementation challenges; (h) critiques of positive psychology; and (i) associated topics related to positive psychology in counselor education.

Notions of the need for increased professional unification and the strengthening of the counselor identity were embedded throughout the interviews conducted in this study. Virtually a mirror reflection of aspects of Kaplan and Gladding's (2011) *Vision for the Future of Counseling: 20/20 Principles for Unifying and Strengthening the Profession*, the respondents reinforced the perception that identity cohesion is a primary issue in counselor education and that it can be strengthened by means of integrating positive psychology. In fact, respondents shared ideas that integrated positive psychology in both the strengthening of professional identity as well as the promotion of client welfare; two strategic areas consistent with the sentiments of the delegates named to the 20/20 vision (Kaplan & Gladding, 2011). The 20/20 visionaries did not explicitly call upon positive psychology as a unifying force; however, the implications of this research study include the revitalization of the connection to professional counseling's historical roots and the responsibility that counselor educators have to the field in promoting counselor identity development and orientation towards client wellness. Perhaps, based on these outcomes, positive psychology can serve as an instrument of cohesion and client welfare as the vision moves forward.

The general agreement that the counseling profession is grounded in components of positive psychology, specifically wellness and the recognition of client strengths, does not guarantee automatic implementation for its integration into counselor education programs and research (Kolodinsky et al., 2014). Barriers efficaciously impede the growth of positive psychology-based research investigations and counselor educator teaching pedagogies, thus softening the alliance between counselor identity and positive psychology. For example, although respondents of this study agree that counselors are currently engaging in a number of positive psychology-informed training and practices, it was noted that the schism between the fields of psychology and counseling has led to barriers specific to professional identity because positive psychology is perhaps recognized as professional psychology-based (and not professional counseling-based). One respondent illustrates this point in identifying the belief that: "Psychologists have effectively laid claim to positive psychology and research on positive psychology." This perceived division, which rests within the schism between psychology training and counselor education, serves as one potential barrier impacting the successful integration of positive psychology into counselor education.

Despite the challenges created by the schism in counselor education and psychology training, there exists an opportunity for intentional counselor identity development as well as joining through positive psychology as a shared framework in the helping professions. While many respondents of this study recognize that counselors have

perhaps lost their way professionally (for a discussion on this topic, see Watts, 2004), a number of them also identified positive psychology as a way to return to the strengths-based, wellness orientation at the foundation of the field of counseling. One way to implement a shift towards this foundation is by means of educational practices that instill values shared amongst professional counselors to include positive psychology. This sentiment is similar to the implications shared by Calley and Hawley (2008) in their investigation into elements that influence the professional identity of counselor educators, who emphasized the importance of “how we transmit the professional identity of counseling to future generations of counselors” (p. 15). Continued consideration for our transmission of values and the foundational components of professional counseling, especially those aligned with positive psychology, is certainly an area for continued development.

In a similar vein, we propose a call for increased research that investigates the effective use of positive psychology-informed counselor-training practices, as it aligns with the fifth consensus issue for advancing the future of counseling according to the 20/20 vision: “expanding and promoting the research base of professional counseling” (Kaplan & Gladding, 2011, p. 371). Considerable attention is encouraged concerning topics related to positive psychology-informed counselor education pedagogy, training methodologies, clinical utility, school counseling settings, agency/organizational settings, and other aspects of counseling that have been shown to benefit from positive psychology and strengths-based interventions. Not until counselor educators claim their stake in promoting evidence-based teaching and clinical training practices, including those informed by positive psychology, will the field strengthen the identity of professional counseling and be confident in this identity as it relates to that of other helping professions that work from wellness and strengths-based approaches to mental health.

Limitations

The interpretation and generalization of the results of this qualitative study are made with caution. This study was primarily limited by its small sample size. While this limited number of leaders provided us with a deep examination into the perceptions of positive psychology as an important topic in the field of counselor education, we are limited to the small number of voices who are represented in the outcomes of this study. The voices that represent the leaders of the field of counselor education, and the American Counseling Association, were limited to primarily White professionals, and included only one female. Therefore, the perspectives shared by this study are not ideally inclusive of all members of the counselor education profession. A final, potential limitation pertains to the inclusivity of divergent perspectives in the growing number of new leaders in the field of counselor education. Due to the intentionality of this study’s focus on the perspectives of established leaders in the field, a number of emerging leaders were not included in this investigation, and therefore, their perspectives on the evolving role of positive psychology in counselor education were not included in this study.

Conclusion

The original aim of this study was to investigate the perceptions held by leaders in the field of counselor education on the role of positive psychology in the field of counselor education. The results provided a number of themes related to the importance of positive psychology in reinstating the professional identity of counselors, potential barriers in establishing positive psychology as a focus of counselor education, and opportunities for future counselor educators to engage in meaningful research related to positive psychology. The consensus of the respondents included in this study was that positive psychology is an especially important aspect of counseling and counselor education and that through this particular framework, counselors have an opportunity to return to professional roots including wellness and strengths-based approaches to mental health. Ultimately, this investigation may have a significant impact in encouraging future investigations into the clinical utility of positive psychology in counseling as well as its potential role in strengthening the unity and identity of professional counselors through counselor education practices informed by positive psychology. Thus, this study postulates the significance of positive psychology in counselor education, primarily in future research and instructional methods, as the field moves forward to promote counselor relevance and a stronger unification for future professional counselors.

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Appendix

Questions for Counselor Education Leaders

1. What does “positive psychology/psychotherapy” mean to you?
2. What is your opinion about the long-term relevance of training master’s level counseling students in theory and research related to positive psychology, and what benefits and challenges do you anticipate counseling students and their clients would experience if they were to study formal research in positive psychology and positive psychotherapy as they would relate to clinical outcomes?
3. Seligman, Rashid, and Parks (2006) have stated that standard clinical approaches in psychotherapy and counseling have focused primarily on symptom relief, whereas positive psychotherapy primarily involves “increasing positive emotion, engagement, and meaning.” What are your thoughts about this distinction?
4. What do you think about the relevance of positive psychology research, in the context of counselor education, with regard to the following themes?
 - a. Positive traits (capacity for love, courage, hope, gratitude, patience, forgiveness, creativity, spirituality, wisdom, and humor);
 - b. Positive subjective experiences (well-being, satisfaction, flow, happiness); and
 - c. Studies about positive organizations (civility, altruism, sense of community)
5. What are your thoughts about the term “psychology” – as in “positive psychology” – being used within the context of counselor education?