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Developing Ethical Reasoning Ability using an Applied Ethics Course

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Daneker, Darlene is an Assistant Professor in Counseling at Marshall University in West Virginia. In her research she continues to explore ways to help her students and other counselors understand, apply, and integrate ethics and moral reasoning in all aspects of their lives.

Ethics form the backbone of the counseling profession and teaching counseling students to understand, be knowledgeable about and to consistently apply the ACA code of ethics is critical to produce professionals capable of addressing complex demands they will face. One of the challenging aspects of training counselors to understand ethics is assuring that students have developed cognitively to understand and apply the code of ethics. This level of cognitive development and understanding is not universal in graduate students (Bebeau, 2002, Brendel, Kolbert, & Foster, 2002). The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of a 16-week applied ethics course designed to increase the moral

reasoning abilities in masters level counseling students as measured by scores on the Defining Issues Test-2 (DIT-2) (Rest, 1979).

Several studies have examined teaching methods designed to increase moral reasoning, including a meta analysis of 55 intervention programs, concluding that the best way to teach ethics is to use the dilemma discussion method combined with a deliberate psychological education approach which emphasizes experiential activity and self-reflection (Brendel, Kolbert, & Foster, 2002; Cole, 1993; Pelsma & Borgers, 1986, Rest, 1986). Using this method of instruction, an applied ethics course was developed which included active student participation in open discussion of ethical dilemmas. The course met weekly for 16 weeks for 1 ½ hour each week. Each week had a specific focus designed to encourage moral development in the students by using a developmental approach to lead students to consider ever increasingly difficult areas of ethical discussion. Kienzlers' (2001) four aspects of critical thinking were utilized in developing weekly class plans. These four aspects; identify and question assumptions, seek multiple perspectives, make connections, and fostering active involvement created opportunities for the instructor to shake the student's frame of reference and create dissonance between what is and what should be in the ethical cases examined. Feedback was gathered from the students at the end of each class in an activity called "valuation" to provide the students an opportunity to inform the instructors of their thoughts, feelings, and progress. These feedback sheets were examined weekly by the instructors to determine if the class needed to be modified to meet student needs and development.

Method

Participants were students ($N = 54$) enrolled in a masters level counseling program during their practicum at a mid-sized mid Atlantic University. Most were women ($N = 40$), Caucasian ($N = 52$) with an average age of 33.6 years.

A Solomon Four design was used for this study utilizing a unique set of circumstances that created four groups of students engaged in practicum at the same time but in different locations. Group one was chosen as a pre-test only control, group two was assigned as the post-test only control, group three was the pre-post experimental, and group four was the pre-post control. Groups one, three, and four were counseling students and completed their practicum at differing sites, group two consisted of masters level clinical psychology students completing their practicum at the same setting as group three. The Solomon Four design is particularly appropriate for a study of this kind since it controls potential confounds such as; history, maturation, testing effects, and temporary contemporaneous effects (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000).

Results

The Defining Issues Test-2 (Rest, 1979) was used to determine if there was a change in the student's moral development over the course of the semester. Using a Kruskal-Wallis test (used because of the low N in some groups), a positive but not significant difference ($p < .08$) was found between the four groups with the experimental group having greater increase in moral development than the other three groups. Using a non-parametric test, Wilcoxin, to examine differences within groups there was a significant difference in the

pre-test and the post-test for both groups three and four indicating that students gained in moral reasoning during their practicum even when not exposed to the intervention.

Another interesting finding was some scores changed in an unexpected direction. Of the experimental students who provided both pre and post information, five had lower scores at the end of the semester than they reported at the beginning. This effect was not noticed in the control group pre-post.

Discussion

The findings of increased moral reasoning ability in both experimental and control groups agrees with other research that has found students increase in moral reasoning during practicum, presumably because of their new interaction with “real” as opposed to “practice” clients and the very real difficulties that come with them (Brendel, Kolbert, & Foster, 2002). However, the lack of a significant increase in moral reasoning in the experimental group compared to the control group is troubling, although there was a positive trend. This could be due to the low number of participants in each group or it could be that the students actually decreased in scores on the DIT from the pre-test to the post-test. Another study found this to be the case (Patenaude, Niyansenga, Fafard, 2003) and hypothesized a “leveling” effect in that students who were low scorers at the beginning of the training went up and students who were high scorers went down. In this case the training model used may need to be changed since this leveling effect was found in the experimental group but not in the control group. Finally, the decrease in scores in students who had previously scored highly may indicate a developmental process at

work. These students may have entered the class thinking they had the answers to ethical dilemmas and through the experience of the class come to realize that things are more complicated than they thought. This may have shaken their beliefs, causing them to temporarily regress in their reasoning that would, over time, rebound to increased levels of competence. A follow-up to test this hypothesis is planned.

Conclusion

It is important for counselor educators to find a curriculum that will increase students' ability to analyze ethical and moral issues in a manner that will facilitate ethical actions. It is not enough to memorize the code of ethics, no code can anticipate all possible challenges and most issues confronting counselors day to day are not specifically covered in the ethical code (Brendel, Kolbert, & Foster, 2002, Kitchener, 1985). This requires a level of cognitive ability to understand the underlying ethical principles. According to Rest & Narvaez (1994), this requires a p score of at least 50%. The pre-test scores for students in this study indicated that 9 (22%) students had p scores over 50%, and only 3 (7%) had p scores over 50% at post test. This is startling but this trend has been found in other studies (Brendel, Kolbert, & Foster, 2002) increasing the need for counselor educators to focus on developing an effective method of instruction to increase students' cognitive ability to engage in moral and ethical reasoning.

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