
Can Counselors Learn to Accurately Assess Their Skills? A Study of Counselor-in-Training Self-Assessments

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How competent am I as a counselor? What are my strengths and weaknesses? These are two of many important questions deserving of counselor self-reflection. The American Counseling Association (ACA) emphasizes the value of counselor self-awareness in order to accurately appraise one's skills and boundaries of competence (ACA, 1995). ACA ethics also require counselors to monitor and enhance their skills when needed. Self-assessing one's performance is important to answer these questions and determine the scope of practice. The ability to accurately assess skills is also magnified by arguments that some counselors may not receive as much supervision as would be ideal (Morrisette, 2001). It may be, that as trainees become practitioners, many will have to rely on their own ability to appraise their performance.

If some counselors, however, are unable to accurately assess their skills, they may continue working with clients without the realization of their lesser proficiency. Many years of social-psychological research indicate that individuals have a difficult time accurately measuring their own competence (Dunning, 2005). A number of studies examining a variety of skills domains have found the most poorly skilled to be most likely to

overestimate their performance (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). Described as the dual-burden, Kruger and Dunning argue that the very skills needed to perform well, are also the skills required to accurately assess one's performance. Thus, a counselor may not only have the problem of being poorly skilled but also suffer the secondary burden of lacking the tools necessary to realize such a weakness.

Another challenge to accurate self-assessment may lie in the concept of fluency. Dunning (2005) points to research which illustrates how individuals tend to trust and use responses in which they feel fluent and distrust those responses which do not come with ease. If generalized, counselors may tend to gravitate toward skills which come easy and avoid or forget skills in which they feel less competence. A consequence of this, as Bjork (1999) finds, is that the less often a memory is retrieved the more difficult it's retrieval becomes. If counselors, over time, come to rely on certain approaches and skills and avoid others, they may develop pockets of incompetence and as a secondary result, these pockets may become blind spots as lesser skills lead to inaccurate self-assessments.

For these reasons, research is currently being conducted to see if counselors-in-training can acquire accurate self-assessments of their skills prior to entering the field as practitioners. Two recent studies have found

counseling students to somewhat improve their self-assessment accuracy following a skills training course early in their graduate studies (Urbani et al., 2002; Little et al., 2005). No research was found specifically addressing whether such improvements could continue and accurate self-assessments be obtained just prior to counselor-trainee graduation. Therefore, this study is examining this next step, comparing student and trained-rater assessments of skills at three points in a counselor training program. In addition, this study also will explore how students describe their experience in self-assessing their skills to hopefully gain a deeper insight into how trainee perceptions relate to their actual performance.

The results of this study will be reported at the American Counseling Association 2006 Annual Convention in Montreal, Canada, in a poster session entitled, “Can counselors-in-training learn to accurately self-assess their own skills? A mixed-method examination.” The rest of this article will provide a deeper inspection into the context of this research, including: 1) challenges to accurate self-assessment, 2) counseling skills training and self-assessment, and 3) concluding thoughts.

As mentioned earlier, accurate self-assessment may be difficult to obtain. Dunning (2005) reviewed a number of comprehensive studies and found

that the correlation coefficient or relationship between one's own perception of his or her performance and the actual level in a number skills domains is on average, .29, a small to modest connection. Dunning's review also highlights that it is more difficult to accurately assess performance involving social and intellectual skills as compared to athletic and other more structured domains. Counseling is often a dynamic and complex process and so it may be particularly challenging to exit a counseling session and accurately rate one's skills performance.

This leads to the question of why it is difficult to accurately self-assess. A number of factors have been studied which may contribute to inaccurate self-assessment. One study highlights a somewhat consistent finding that gender may play a role, as males were found to be more confident in their surgical performance as compared to females even though females actually out performed their male counterparts (Lind et al., 2002). The Better-Than-Average (BTA) effect is a concept developed from research findings that people in general tend to see themselves as above average on positive traits and lower on negative (Alicke et al., 1995).

Another tendency individuals may have is to view things with a top-down perspective (Dunning, 2005). Instead of basing assessments on the specific

behaviors or skills that occurred (bottom-up), individuals may enter the performance with a belief of their abilities which then dictates how they appraise their assessment (top-down). A counselor for example, may inaccurately believe he or she is competent at asking concise open-ended questions. But in the session, this counselor may ramble and struggle with questioning skills. The prior belief and confidence however, may override evidence coming from the performance and cause the counselor to rate a higher level of skill than occurred.

In addition to individual factors which may influence the accuracy of self-assessment, the nature of training may also play a significant role. Bjork (1999) reported on a number of such training variables. One finding reported is that massed practice or condensed trainings are less effective as compared spaced practice in promoting long-term retention. Thus those receiving a weekend workshop skills training may feel and appear just as competent upon completion as someone finishing a semester-long course, however this assessment is likely to diverge from actual skill levels as the massed training recipients' skills fade more quickly over time.

Bjork (1999) also argues that a number of “desirable difficulties” (p. 441) in training are helpful in reducing the likelihood that training will lead to

artificially inflated self-assessments of competence. Such recommended difficulties include varying the context in which skills are learned, allowing time needed to learn from mistakes, and requiring trainees to not just imitate trainer behavior, but become actively engaged in producing non-cued responses (Bjork). Counseling programs may be advised to incorporate such research backed conditions in order to help counseling trainees avoid false perceptions of the quality of learning and competence obtained.

A variety of approaches have evolved to teach counselors skills, from early methods having counselors learn by being a client, to having counselor trainees observe experienced practitioners demonstrate and describe skills (Crews et al., 2005). Recently, the Skilled-Counselor Training Model (SCTM) was developed by incorporating training of both low and high level counseling skills through having trainees learn about, observe, and perform skills, and then self-assess as well as receive peer and instructor feedback (Urbani et al., 2002). Research has found the SCTM approach to reliably improve trainee counseling skills (Smaby et al., 1999), lead to skill transfer into work with actual clients (Schaeffle, Smaby, Maddux, & Cates, 2005), and enhance counselor self-efficacy (Urbani et al., 2002).

Two recent studies have specifically examined the SCTM programs influence on the accuracy of counselor-in-training self-assessments (Urbani et al., 2002; Little et al., 2005). Both found counselors-in-training to overestimate their skill performance prior to SCTM training and to underestimate, although by a smaller degree, their performance at the end of the training. These findings may be understood by Kruger and Dunning's (1999) research which, as cited earlier, found those least skilled to suffer the dual-burden of poor performance and poor appraisal with a tendency to greatly overestimate performance. Conversely, Dunning (2005) reports findings that the most highly skilled actually slightly underestimate their performances as they are relatively accurate in identifying their own score, but falsely attribute more competence to their peers than is deserved.

It can be argued that the counselor-in-training shift from overestimation to underestimation of skills is a positive step for two primary reasons. First, as found by Kruger and Dunning (1999) top-performers tend to underestimate and this was found both by Urbani et al. (2002) and Little et al. (2005), who reported counselor-trainees to perform much more skillfully following SCTM training with a slight underestimation of performance. Second, it can be argued that the humble yet somewhat self-critical perception of a high level skill performer is preferable to the overconfidence possessed by

those of minimal skill.

Both of these studies examined counselors-in-training receiving the SCTM training early in their graduate course work. Currently, research is being conducted to examine the accuracy of such student self-assessments as they complete their final semester of counselor training and prepare to enter the field. In addition, this current research is also qualitatively examining the reported experiences of counselors-in-training at three points of self-assessments to help better understand how these individuals come to self-assess as they do.

Accurate self-assessment may be challenging to obtain. Yet, such precision in measuring performance may be necessary for a counselor to maintain and enhance his or her skills as well as gaining insight into the more global awareness of his or her boundaries of competence. The hope of this current research is to build on prior findings and add a small but important increase in our understanding, by seeing if counselors-in-training can obtain accurate self-assessments of their skills and examining why this might be.

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