REFLECTIONS ON REFLECTING: HOW SELF-AWARENESS PROMOTES PERSONAL GROWTH

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Abstract

This qualitative study affirms the role of self-awareness in promoting personal growth. Experiences of sixteen graduate students enrolled in a counselor education program that intentionally requires self-reflection, introspection, and interaction were explored. Through written narratives, participants reported that engaging in activities designed to enhance self-awareness served to promote their personal and professional development.

Being engaged in an on-going process of introspection allowed participants to effectively follow a path somewhat parallel to that of clients in therapy. Themes emerging from their narratives included heightened awareness of self, recognition of personal potential, enhanced empathy for self and others, and improved interpersonal relationships. Emerging from their focused efforts in self-reflection, participants reported an expanded sense of self and a confidence in their capacity to become successful counselors.

Enhanced self-awareness, long the hallmark of psychological health across insight-oriented therapies, offers promising direction for counselor education.
Introduction

Many theories of Counseling Psychology emphasize self-awareness as an essential aspect of psychological health (Corey, 2001; Critelli, 1987; Hamachek, 1992; Schneider-Corey & Corey, 2002; Schultz, 1977). Self-awareness and introspection are typically important components of counselor-education programs (Corey, 2001; Kottler, 2000; Schultz, 1977). As a counselor-educator, my experience suggests that many prospective counselors commence their graduate programs not prepared for this personal focus. Rather, they expect their studies to emphasize assessment and intervention strategies, psychopathology, and treatment. While these areas represent significant aspects of counselor education, the importance of personal awareness and growth should not be overlooked.

My own efforts to promote self-reflection among graduate students often meet with much resistance. Typically, the students I encounter seek clear-cut approaches to client issues and are eager to learn techniques and skills. For many students, it seems that a focus on "self" initially appears irrelevant, impractical, and non-productive. Fortunately, given time and encouragement, most students embrace the process of self-reflection and the results are highly rewarding. While students and instructors frequently attest to this reality, the phenomenon of personal growth is seldom explored in the literature.

This study explores the experiences of graduate students in a counseling program emphasizing introspection and self-reflection. As participants chronicle their movement from resistance to awareness, they provide an inside view of the ways in which self-reflection might promote personal growth. Accessing the inner world of individuals who are engaged in such personal and professional evolution offers insight and direction for counseling theory, clinical practice, and graduate program design.

Literature Review

Texts in the realm of counselor education routinely support the notion that self-awareness and personal therapy are important prerequisites in the journey to becoming a counselor (e.g., Corey, 2001; Critelli, 1987; Hamachek, 1992; Kottler, 2000; Schneider-Corey & Corey, 2002). To date, the relationship between self-awareness and professional development has been difficult to encapsulate. While personal therapy has been promoted as an important aspect of counselor training, efforts to determine the relationship between personal therapy and counselor effectiveness have been inconclusive (Macran & Shapiro, 1998; Macran, Stiles, & Smith, 1999; McEwan & Duncan, 1993). This study supports the view that while therapy is certainly one way toward self-awareness, it is not the only way.

The emphasis here is on the opportunities for personal growth that may emerge for graduate students by virtue of a concentrated focus on self-awareness outside of therapy. Such engagement is often difficult and may be particularly threatening to
students who are often preoccupied with acquiring skills and techniques while also working to maintain grades. Often, it seems that student counselors believe that self-exploration can be helpful to others but they are often reticent to recognize the relevance of its principles in their own lives. For humanistic therapies, however, self-awareness represents a hallmark of psychological health (Corey, 2001).

Corey (2001) points out that counselors routinely promote the value of self-awareness in their clients:

Increasing self-awareness, which includes awareness of alternatives, motivations, factors influencing the person, and personal goals, is an aim of all counseling. It is the therapist's task to indicate to the client that a price must be paid for increased awareness. (p. 146)

In a similar vein, Kottler (2000) addresses the perils of counselors who are not prepared to work toward self-reflection:

There is nothing that devalues helping professions more than to have its practitioners walking around like hypocrites, unable to practice in their own lives what they ask of others. If you want to help others to be more fully functioning, then that means you should take a similar stand in your own life to address your own unresolved issues. (p. 133)

Similarly, Schneider-Corey and Corey (2002) state:

A central characteristic for any therapeutic person is an awareness of self, including one's identity, cultural perspective, goals, motivations, needs, limitations, strengths, values, feelings, and problems. If you have a limited understanding of who you are, you will surely not be able to facilitate this kind of awareness in clients. (p. 32)

The value of self-awareness is well articulated in several counseling theories, but most particularly in humanistic approaches such as Existential and Person-Centered therapies. For these approaches, which emphasize therapeutic interaction and insight, self-awareness is paramount to achieving change and growth. In his description of Existential Therapy, Corey (2001) states:

as human beings, we can reflect and make choices because we are capable of self-awareness. The greater our awareness, the greater our possibilities for freedom.... Thus to expand our awareness is to increase our capacity to live fully.... We can choose either to expand or restrict our consciousness. Because self-awareness is at the root of most other human capacities, the decision to expand it is fundamental to human growth. (p. 145)
Rogers (1995) describes his personal experience of the power of self-reflection which serves to inform the Person-Centered approach:

I have found it effective, in my dealings with people, to be acceptant of myself. I feel that over the years I have learned to become adequate in listening to myself; so that I know somewhat more adequately than I used to what I am feeling at any given moment--to be able to realize that I am angry, or that I do feel rejecting toward this person, or that I am uninterested in what is going on, or that I am eager to understand this individual. All of these diverse attitudes are feelings which I think I can listen to in myself. One way of putting this is that I feel I have become more adequate in letting myself be what I am. It becomes easier for me to accept myself in the way in which I would like to function.... The curious paradox is that when I accept myself as I am, then I change. I believe that I have learned this from my clients as well as from within my own experience -- that we cannot change, we cannot move away from what we are, until we thoroughly accept what we are. Then change seems to come about almost unnoticed. (p. 10)

As the therapist comes to know and accept himself/herself, personal change becomes possible. Increased self-acceptance engenders acceptance of others. "It is only when I can be myself, when I can accept myself, that it is possible for me to understand and accept others" (Rogers, 1995, p. 19).

Critelli (1987) expands on this phenomenon of personal growth:

Once we have attained an attitude of self-acceptance, we no longer need to fear whatever thoughts or feelings we are experiencing. This allows us to welcome and become excited about our unfolding experience; it gives us the freedom to learn more about who we really are. Once we can accept ourselves, instances of pettiness, greed, revenge, and selfishness, which we all experience, can be recognized, acknowledged, and transcended. (p. 398)

Barrett-Lennard (1997) describes the limitations of therapists who are unwilling to be self-reflective and thereby listen to their own inner processing:

those who give little attention to their own inner stirrings, or who anxiously ward off impulses or other patterns within the self, are not likely to be very receptive to the felt inner experiencing and meanings of others." (p. 104)

In the Person-Centered context, therapist self-acceptance is a pivotal aspect of client growth. The therapist must be self-accepting in order to accept the client. The
self-accepting therapist evokes a parallel process in the client: As the client feels accepted by the therapist, he/she grows increasingly self-accepting. "Acceptance of the client by the therapist leads to an increased acceptance of self by the client" (Rogers, 1961, p. 207).

Hamachek (1992) captures the essence of therapeutic interaction in regard to self-awareness:

There is a certain paradoxical truth in the observation that we can get to know ourselves better through knowing others, and we can come to know others better through knowing ourselves. (p. 318)

Self-reflection and self-awareness thereby pave the way for acceptance and understanding of others.

It is a very paradoxical thing--that to the degree that each one of us is willing to be himself, then he finds not only himself changing, but he finds that other people to whom he relates are also changing. (Rogers, 1995, pp. 20-21)

A capacity for self-reflection holds major implications for therapists and for the clients with whom they interact.

That self-reflection promotes growth and development is thus widely supported across insight-oriented therapeutic approaches. Furthermore, there is much agreement that being introspective, self-aware, and self-accepting are important characteristics of professional helpers and thereby worthy of attention in counselor education. While the relationship between self-awareness and personal growth makes sense intuitively, the relationship has not been clearly documented in the literature. Such is the aim of this research.

Method

My interest in exploring the influence of self-reflection on personal growth emerges out of many years teaching classes in psychology and counseling. As a humanistically oriented therapist, I believe in promoting self-awareness in the interest of personal growth and development. My courses have routinely emphasized self-awareness and my initial efforts have typically met with resistance from students. However, I have learned that given time and support, most students become engaged with the process of introspection and many offer anecdotal evidence which attests to its significance in their lives. My hope here is to capture something of these experiences which then might be shared with beginning graduate students and counseling professionals.

This qualitative study examines the impact of course work that intentionally requires self-reflection, introspection, and interaction on personal growth and
development. The 16 volunteer participants (8 males and 8 females) were students who had recently graduated from a Master's Program in Counseling and Human Development at the University of New Brunswick (Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada). Participants' ages ranged from 22 years to 56 years, with the average age being 33 years. Over a one to two year period, the participants were members of at least four graduate courses emphasizing self-awareness. Throughout this period, the participants engaged in weekly journal writing aimed at capturing personal process. Students were encouraged to explore their own growth and development, their interactions with fellow students, and the therapeutic work they were undertaking in their practice counseling sessions (at least one hour per week). Students endeavored to relate what they were learning and experiencing to their developing therapeutic styles. For example, when we examined the concept of "suspending judgement" within a therapeutic encounter, students were encouraged to think and write about their personal experiences of being judged, their own tendencies toward being judgemental, and the ways in which these experiences might affect their therapeutic style. Similarly, when we examined the phenomenon of "countertransference," students were asked to think and write about the various aspects of human nature that typically "push their buttons" and again, to reflect on how their responses might influence their work as counselors. As the instructor, I endeavored to provide feedback on their weekly journals, during their in-class display of video tapes, and through their formal counseling supervision. These materials eventually served as a point of reference for those students who chose to be participants in this study.

Drawing from their journals, videos, process notes, and recollections, participants prepared written narratives describing their experiences within the Program. In utilizing a variety of sources, it was hoped that students could create a relatively accurate picture of their personal and professional evolution. However, the retrospective nature of the data must be acknowledged along with the reality that individuals' perspectives on experiences change over time.

The narratives were not designed to elicit student evaluations of the Counseling Program. Rather, the emphasis of the narrative was for participants to conceptualize their own psychological growth while enrolled in the program. Although I am an instructor in this program, none of the participants were actual students at the time the research was conducted. However, it must be acknowledged that those who volunteered to participate were aware of my predisposition toward self-reflection and so it is likely that the volunteers were similarly predisposed. However, in keeping with the spirit of "discriminate sampling" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) it makes sense to find participants who were prepared to articulate their experiences of personal growth as it relates to their efforts at self-reflection. Understanding this connection from the inside out was the goal of this research.

Participants were encouraged to frame their narratives in ways which best described their experiences in the Program although the following questions were offered as guidelines:

"Describe the expectations that you had with respect to the Counseling
Program when you first began."

"Were there ways in which these expectations were fulfilled, challenged, and/or disrupted? Please elaborate."

"Describe your response to the emphasis on self-reflection within several courses in the Program. How did this emphasis fit with your view of becoming a counselor? Has your perspective on this matter changed since you entered the Program?"

"How did being in the Program affect you personally (view of self, view of the world, conceptualization of counseling, understanding of growth and change)?"

How has your participation in the Program impacted on you professionally?" "How might you utilize self-reflection in your counseling career?"

The data resulting from narratives were coded for content (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Seidman, 1991; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) by two independent raters. Emergent themes included "heightened awareness of self," "recognition of personal potential," "enhanced empathy for self and others," and "improved interpersonal relationships."

The self-reflection inherent to this current research appeared to be a positive personal experience for participants and the process provided an opportunity for a celebration of their growth.

Exploring participants' experiences of personal growth affirms the power of self-reflection. Introspection opens the door for us to know more of ourselves and at the same time enables us to be more open to knowing others. For individuals choosing a career in counseling, understanding of this phenomenon is of particular significance.

Results

The participants brought a variety of expectations to their counselor education program. For the most part, they were unprepared for the emphasis on self-reflection. Many students anticipated a strong emphasis on skills training and intervention strategies and, as such, the program did not meet their preconceived notions of "how to do counseling." Diane states, "I had hoped to obtain skills (basically a bag of tricks) which would assist me when working with students and their families." Kelly echoes these sentiments, "I expected that after I finished the program, I would have a 'recipe to counseling.' I would be able to clearly define problem areas and be able to fix them." For these individuals, it took time to reconcile the need for self-reflection in the context of becoming a counselor:

I was waiting to receive the magical formula which would unleash my talents as a counselor. As I researched patiently through the literature, I realized that this exercise was futile and
that there was no real secret to counseling .... [Eventually] I realized that perhaps I was already there but had not noticed it yet. Perhaps the great revelation I was waiting for would come from inside myself. (John)

Kent further illustrates this sense of awakening:

I always envisioned a counselor as an individual who listened to people's problems and in return offered the appropriate answers to the problems, something similar to the doctor/patient relationship.... I never expected the emphasis on the exploration of the self and never truly understood how the journey of the self would play such an integral role in the process of counseling. (Kent)

Even those who anticipated some element of self-exploration were not prepared for the impact such a focus would have. Alana's comments typify this perspective:

I expected to learn the right things to say at exactly the right moment to help people to feel better and to allow them to reach their full potential. I expected that there was some neat and tidy formula that I would be able to learn and master so that each of my clients would go away feeling light, happy and looking forward to the days to come. I also knew that there was a strong emphasis on self-awareness in many of the courses, so I was anticipating a year of learning to know myself better and consequentially growing as a person.

By the end of the first week, I realized that part of my expectation was right on the mark, and that part was dead wrong. We would certainly be doing quite a lot of work on self-awareness, but learning the 'magic formula' was out of the question. The emphasis on self-awareness and personal growth not only challenged my expectations about the content of the counseling program but, more importantly, it changed my entire perception of how I view the counseling profession. (Alana)

In addition to broadening their program expectations and their views on counseling, the emphasis on self-reflection offered individuals an opportunity to connect with people in a manner in which they had not previously engaged. Kyle describes his experience in this regard:

I didn't expect to get too attached to my classmates. I figured that I would simply go about my business and make some casual acquaintances. I expected that the program members would be extremely competitive, aloof, and self-absorbed as this was my experience at the undergraduate level. I also didn't expect to get too
involved in exploring and sharing my personal issues. I figured I would say what I have to say, tell people what they want to hear, and basically keep things on a superficial level.

Looking back at the whole experience I can't help but wonder about the origin of my expectations. Perhaps the answer to that question arises from within my own insecurities. I wasn't too keen on getting close to strangers.... In terms of examining personal issues, I didn't plan to because I was very uncomfortable with sharing my problems. (Kyle)

Like Kyle, Brenda expresses her surprise at the level of cohesion that the group developed as a result of self-reflection: "I had not expected to experience such a positive group experience, and caring, supportive professors or the emphasis on self-reflection.... The experience changed my life and I could not say anything negative except that the program ended."

As these comments suggest, participants were largely unprepared for what they would discover about themselves, their classmates, or the process of counseling, when they engaged in structured introspection and self-reflection. Their journeys inward did not come easily or without resistance. However, an exploration of the themes emerging from the research narratives illustrates the positive impact that such a focus evoked.

**Heightened Awareness of Self**

Self-reflection should promote self-awareness and, potentially, personal change. All participants reported a heightened self-awareness as a result of engaging in self-reflection. Having an atmosphere conducive to self-reflection was greatly appreciated by the participants. Simon describes how the structure of the program nourished self-awareness:

The closeness of the groups, the freedom to be myself, and the trustworthiness of the members and the leader helped make it truly meaningful.... It was as if the open environment provided in class helped the course concepts become more meaningful through their relation to the members in the group.... The groups provided an environment in which it was okay to be myself. As such it made it much easier to become more self-aware. (Simon)

This newly developed awareness was both startling and exciting. Sandra's conceptualization of her movement toward greater self-awareness is typical of most participants:

I had no idea there would be so much personal development, challenges and introspection. In fact, it wasn't even something that I had really considered in any depth. I thought counseling was all
about the client -- I, as a counselor, was there to focus on the client and help the client. Little did I know; it was such a two-way street. This meant stepping out of a huge comfort zone: all my life I have focused on others, putting myself in the shadows. To come out of the shadows both personally and professionally meant going into uncharted territory. Realizing I could not be two people -- a personal me and a professional me -- meant that I'd have to confront the personal me in ways I never imagined. (Sandra)

Interestingly, participants discovered that enhanced self-awareness not only taught them much about themselves, but it also served to improve their understanding of how counseling actually works. Clarke describes the ways in which self-reflection taught him the essence of counseling as process:

From being in this program, I learned that no matter how emotionally tough you think you are, or how unnecessary you may think talking about personal issues is, I believe that counseling is a very healthy way to cleanse yourself of the very things that are causing you stress, anxiety, or hardship. I came from a blue-collar background where men were men, and the world only worked one way. I grew up in a mining and paper-mill town, and I learned the ways of life according to this culture. I played sports all my life, drank beer, swore, and experienced the good, the bad, and the ugly of what life had to offer. Many lessons were learned the hard way, and I learned to roll with the punches. The way I figure it is, if I can benefit from this program and the counseling field itself, then there are a lot of people out there who don't realize just how important it is to be able to discuss or express themselves in relation to their personal lives. (Clarke)

Several participants reported that enhanced self-awareness opened the door for changes that would ultimately improve their effectiveness as counselors:

I'd say that the bulk of my learning came from the reflecting. That's because I soon found out that I'd hardly known myself at all, and that I needed to work on myself if I ever hoped to be of any help to anyone else.... It was through self reflection that I discovered that I was not the great listener that I thought I was. Since counseling is all about listening, it was a really good thing that I figured that out! Because of that I was able to improve on the skill. It was also from self-reflecting that I realized what my own issues were and how they might affect my counseling. (Sylvia)

Kent outlines his experience similarly:

I soon realized the importance of knowing oneself and the value of being able to take emotional risks.... I have dared to
explore issues that have plagued me on a conscious and an unconscious level. I firmly believe that all people have their skeletons in one closet or another. The emotional risks were difficult, yet rewarding because I have identified the painful issues and have gained a better appreciation of their significance. It is difficult to facilitate the same journey with clients, if the counselor himself/herself is not able to venture down these same roads. (Kent)

By virtue of their enhanced self-awareness, participants came to see the value of counselor self-understanding as an aspect of the counseling process. Kyle's statements capture participants' experiences nicely: "I now see the merits of working on my own personal growth. I know I need to work on getting unfinished business in my own life in order before I can begin to help others." Helen personalizes her experience similarly:

I believe that I came away with so much more knowledge and personal peacefulness as a result of self-reflection.... Reflecting on my feelings has enabled me to understand myself better, which ultimately helps me to understand others better. (Helen)

Bill offers a specific illustration of this dynamic:

I feel as though an awareness of my own personality is essential when dealing with clients. For example,... I value harmony and tend to avoid conflict situations with others. If I were to conduct therapy without this insight, I would almost certainly present as overly passive and refrain from confronting clients in order to meet my own needs at the expense of theirs. My awareness will hopefully reduce the likelihood of this dynamic and allow me to respond in ways beneficial to the client rather than myself. (Bill)

Brenda's comments provide a good synthesis of the importance of self-awareness in counselor education:

One of the most important things I learned is that I cannot be issue free and value free but I can continually facilitate my own self-growth as I facilitate my client's psychological growth. And, I am more aware and prepared for countertransference when it occurs. I have a more meaningful grasp of who I am as a person and am more aware of and accepting of my strengths and weaknesses. (Brenda)

For the participants in this study, the process of self-reflection served to enhance their self-awareness and thereby informed their understanding of counseling as an interactive endeavor. Personally and professionally, this expansion of personal awareness had positive implications.
Recognition of Personal Potential

For most participants self-reflection provoked a new way of dealing with the world that was liberating and inspiring. Participants demonstrated a sense of freedom and choice that had implications both personally and professionally. People felt like they could change their own lives and make a positive difference in the lives of others: "The skills and insights that I have obtained have enhanced my personal growth and provided me with additional tools to interpret my world" (Diane). "I have stumbled upon a richer and more vibrant way of helping and interacting with people" (Kent). "I leave the program with the feeling of new beginnings on the horizon with endless possibilities for the future. I believe I can model that hopefulness for clients" (John). Such comments suggest the immense power of self-reflection in terms of personal growth and development.

For George, the impact of self-reflection on his sense of personal potential was experienced in the classroom context:

It was through deep introspection that I was finally able to realize the tremendous value of living a process-based lifestyle.... The black-and-white style of thinking that I relied on for so many years had suddenly and repeatedly come into sharp focus--and it became obvious to me that it was restricting me and was detrimental to me!.... Journal writing enabled me to take a hard look at my own behaviors and reactions during class discussions.... I used these reflections to change my future behavior in seminar classes and activities. Over time, I could 'feel' myself taking a much more proactive role in the group and opening up, showing a lighter side of my personality. (George)

Similarly, Kyle outlines the impact of expanding his sense of personal potential:

I feel I am more open than ever before to new experiences. I have experienced a great deal of firsts this year. I have learned to embrace new challenges rather than fear them or worry about them.... I now feel confident that I made the right career choice. (Kyle)

Alana also connects her personal efforts in self-reflection to her future evolution as a counselor:

Given the opportunity to really reflect on myself and to grow personally, I have been able to develop as a counselor in ways that I didn't even think were possible. This realization will inevitably follow me throughout my life and will allow me to continue the self-growth that is so beneficial and essential in the counseling profession. (Alana)
Mark recounts his discovery of potential in terms of his personal and professional future:

Overall I have a sense of awakening to my self and my abilities that will carry me into the future.... I am confident that the process of self-reflection will help me maneuver my way as a counselor and throughout life in general. (Mark)

For Kelly, self-reflection opened a world of possibility in terms of the contribution she expects to make as a professional counselor:

Through self-reflection I feel we can grow and understand ourselves better, moving on to experience and meet future challenges life has to offer.... I realized that counseling is not only individualistic for the counselor but also for the client. What works for one client may not work for another. But one thing I believe works for all is self-reflection. I feel a person will not be able to grow and move forward unless he/she is able to take a closer look at him/herself. I do believe that self-reflection can be done in many different ways. It depends on the individual. I will be sensitive to this individuality. In practice I will utilize self-reflection by providing clients a safe and respectful environment that will hopefully encourage self-exploration. (Kelly)

For these participants, the self-reflection required in the context of this counseling program established a tone of hopefulness and possibility with regard to ongoing personal and professional growth.

In addition to acknowledging self-reflection as a central component in broadening their current sense of personal potential, participants demonstrate an ongoing commitment to this process:

[Initially, I thought that] I didn't have any problems and self-reflection would only be a waste of time. Thank goodness I learned better! It was through self-reflection that I realized how not true that was, and if I hadn't figured that out, I know that I would not be where I am today in terms of counseling skills and abilities.... I believe that, if I hadn't been 'made' to look at myself, I never would have, and would have just been a 'technical counselor.' Now I have adopted a mandate of continual personal growth, which I feel is necessary to maintain all throughout my career, and indeed, my life. I never want to lose my insight and understanding, nor do I ever want to think that I've become all that I can be. Stagnation is like giving up on myself, and I think that attitude will be reflected to my clients. When that happens I may as well retire. I can't expect growth for my clients when my own stops. This is not something
that I knew when I entered this program, but it is probably one of
the most important things I've learned. (Sylvia)

Brenda elaborates this point further:

I am no longer a rescuer and fixer, but I will affirm my client's
reality whether I concur or not. The client's reality is just that -- it
belongs to the client -- and he/she has the right to express it in a
safe place. As a professional, I will always self-reflect as I do in my
personal life. I hope that I have internalized Carl Rogers' positive
characteristics of a helper. I believe that the key to facilitating a
client's growth is making and forming a relationship and providing
a place where the client can speak with positive support.... I do not
believe that I can provide this environment without doing my own
self-reflection. (Brenda)

Finally, Simon describes the sense of confidence he feels upon leaving the
program that he attributes directly to his engagement in self-reflection:

I feel prepared to be a successful counselor.... I know what can
be helpful, how it can be helpful, and why it is helpful for
individuals. A great deal of my belief and understanding has come
from the personal gains that this program has helped me to
achieve.... I believe my personal growth will continue to expand
exponentially, as I become more self-aware, moving closer and
closer toward self-actualization. (Simon)

Participants' experiences affirm the value of self-reflection in relation to
recognition of personal potential. Engaging in self-reflection in the context of a
supportive environment evokes immediate and future-oriented personal and
professional growth.

**Enhanced Empathy for Self and Others**

For most of these participants the process of self-reflection opened the way for
self-empathy. Through knowing more of themselves, they became more self-
accepting.

It is possible that the change one experiences during
self-reflection is due to the new found ability to reach deep inside
oneself and get acquainted with one's true identity, hence the ability
to know myself, to accept who I am as well as to be able to like
myself. (John)

Similarly, Alana states:

I feel that through coming to know myself more intimately, I
Sharon Myers

have become more empathic to those around me and not as quick to lay judgment because I can imagine how another person is feeling more easily. I feel that overall, self-discovery has made me slow down and take the time to reflect... I find myself really journeying with clients and letting them find their own way through reflecting on themselves and giving them the opportunity to uncover their own unique path. (Alana)

For Carol, self-reflection provided an opportunity for her to see the counseling process from the client's perspective:

This experiential learning demanded the establishment of rapport and trust. By being placed in the vulnerable position of exposing one's self emotionally, awareness was raised as to what a client might feel like, and it became more possible to develop empathy. I respect the fact that counseling involves developing a professional intimacy with people who are often exploring the disappointments of their lives. Making a person feel safe enough to open up to you is an awesome challenge and I was pleased with the extent to which we explored this issue throughout the program. (Carol)

As participants developed increased self-empathy, they typically reported a greater capacity for empathy with others. In a very personal manner, Sandra captures the relationship between self-empathy and demonstrating empathy for others:

I have come to have a greater acceptance and understanding of others -- that they too must have had factors and influences that have played a part in where they are today. Just as I am realizing that I could have used more validation and acceptance from others and from myself, other people need this too. This has helped me to conceptualize counseling. Before we can change ourselves or our situation, we must come to find, understand, and accept ourselves as we are. (Sandra)

Bill further develops this conceptualization:

I think these experiences allow me a greater level of empathy toward my clients who experience similar emotions... In addition to gaining an increased level of empathy for others who embark on the tumultuous journey of self-discovery and growth, I also embraced a level of empathy for myself that had previously eluded me. Prior to this degree I conceptualized counseling as a process of change, but I now see therapy as being as much about acceptance as it is about change. Prior to this program I was very harsh toward myself for my perceived short-comings, frequently condemning myself when I acted in ways which I felt were undesirable. I have
since become much more empathic and accepting towards my disposition and early experiences which have shaped the essence of my current personality. For me, this does not translate into stagnation or a belief that change is a futile struggle, but rather a belief that acceptance must precede change. Change does not emerge out of negative judgments of self-defamation, but out of compassion and empathy. (Bill)

As these participants illustrate, emphasis on self-reflection promotes self-empathy and at the same time, clears the way to develop a broader capacity for empathy with others. In this sense, self-reflection has profound implications for counselor education and for counseling practice.

Improved Interpersonal Relationships

Many participants reported that the required emphasis on self-reflection led to improved interpersonal relationships outside of their class group. For the most part, participants locate themselves as the source of this new approach to relationships:

I'm not as judgmental as I once was. Oh, I'm still judgmental but I've gained an 'other side of the coin' perspective that I didn't have before. Also, I recognize when I am being judgmental and how I can deal with it. (Sylvia)

Kyle offers a personal perspective as to how this sort of change occurred for him:

I was simply able to be me.... I have learned the value in sharing my problems, worries, fears and mistakes with others. I have been reluctant to display vulnerability in the past for I feared others would think less of me. I have found that by being a more open, less guarded person, people seem to be more comfortable in my presence. I think that by being more honest with myself, people are more comfortable with me. (Kyle)

Several participants described specific ways in which they noticed improvements in their interpersonal relationships. Clarke elaborates on the direct changes in his daily interactions:

I now realize the effect of how I say things to people. I am a better listener. I am a much more patient and understanding father, and husband.... I am more open about my feelings. I relate better to my siblings. I can talk to my parents about sensitive issues, whereas before, I wouldn't. I am much more broad, in terms of how I see the world. I accept the things that I cannot change. I am happier with my life, and I have accepted my situation. I will help others in their quest for personal fulfillment. I feel more normal. (Clarke)
Similarly, George outlines the ways in which he relates differently to others: "Today, I am less afraid to show my imperfections to others. When I do, I often witness more people being comfortable with me, appreciating my 'being' there as a person rather than what I am 'doing'."

As these participants illustrate, self-reflection can provoke change and growth that extends beyond the sphere of the self. Taking the time to know and understand the self enables the self to function more fully in the interpersonal domain.

**Conclusions**

This study affirms the importance of self-reflection in promoting personal growth and supports its value as a component of counselor education. Self-reflection enables the prospective counselor to walk the client's road, to be in touch with themselves in their vulnerabilities, and to acknowledge the magnitude of personal change.

While this study supports the notion that self-awareness promotes personal growth, certain limitations are evident. As noted earlier, participants were aware of my personal biases favoring the emphasis on self-awareness and it is likely that the students who chose to be part of the study held similar views. Intuitively, it makes sense that people who believe in the value of enhancing self-awareness are more likely to reflect on its role in their personal development. Students who detested the focus on self-awareness and/or felt they gained little from the experience would be unlikely to participate in this study. Furthermore, it has been noted that participants in this study offered retrospective accounts of their personal growth -- while drawing on written and taped materials prepared during their time within the counseling program. Without doubt, one's perspective on personal experience may change with time. However, in the spirit of qualitative research, the aim is not to attain "truth," but rather, to capture lived experience. Finally, while all participants report that their counseling skills were enhanced by virtue of becoming more self-aware, it is often difficult to see the direct relationship between the growth they experienced personally and the professional development they claim to have attained. Indeed, there is something ethereal about isolating such a direct link since personal and professional development are highly individualized pursuits and thereby difficult to encapsulate.

A promising direction for future research might involve having students chronicle their expanded self-awareness in relation to both personal and professional growth as they proceed throughout their training program. Such an approach could provide a moment-to-moment analysis of the relationship between self-awareness and professional development and simultaneously diminish the perils of relying on retrospective accounts. However, professional development notwithstanding, this study suggests a strong relationship between self-awareness and personal growth. Results also imply that incorporating a self-reflection component in counselor education programs -- particularly those fostering insight-oriented therapeutic styles, is a worthy consideration.
For therapists invested in helping clients become more self-reflective, enhancing their own self-awareness would seem to be a natural direction. Participants illustrate the ways in which they believe becoming more self-aware has made them better counselors: "I soon found out that I'd hardly known myself at all, and that I needed to work on myself if I ever hoped to be of help to anyone else" (Sylvia). Through accessing increased personal potential, participants report feeling ready to empower clients in acquiring a sense of personal agency: "I leave the program with the feeling of new beginnings on the horizon with endless possibilities for the future. I believe I can model that hopefulness for clients" (John). Having worked to develop greater empathy with self and others, participants recognize the benefits of clients attaining self-empathy: "Just as I am realizing that I could have used more validation and acceptance from others and from myself, other people need this too" (Sandra). By examining their own relationships, participants describe themselves as capable of being more real in the therapeutic encounter and better able to assist clients in functioning more fully in their relational worlds: "I think that by being more honest with myself people are more comfortable with me. Furthermore, it is liberating to not have to pretend you are perfect" (Kyle). Such experiences are lived experiences and as much as theoretical knowledge and practice can inform our perspective, it is the individual application of these realities that contributes to growth and development.

Of particular note is that for participants in this study, self-reflection occurred in an interpersonal context. Interacting with classmates facing similar struggles and taking similar risks inspired individuals to move forward. Feeling the support of the group and the instructors, participants were encouraged to work on their own development. This leap of faith evoked a sense of commonality and a feeling that people were there to support one another. Significantly, recognition of one's interdependence has important implications for becoming an effective counselor:

To the very vulnerable and guarded self, others are always a potential threat, and the consequent narrowing of perception leaves little scope for responsive empathy. It might be said that such a person is seldom in a mood state with others in which their capacity for empathy can be exercised. (Barrett-Lennard, 1997, p. 104)

For the prospective counselor, facing personal vulnerabilities and allowing others to witness them, promotes self-empathy and enhances the potential for development of empathic relationships with others. In the same vein, belonging to a core group who are engaged in on-going introspection and who are there to be supportive and encouraging, offers a parallel to the therapeutic encounter. Clients come to counselors to be heard and through this process they come to know and accept more of themselves:

Being listened to by an understanding person makes it possible for [a person] to listen more accurately to himself, with greater empathy toward his own visceral experiencing, his own vaguely felt meanings. (Rogers, 1975, p. 8)
Routinely, counselors ask clients to self-reflect in the interest of growth and development. Surely, those who act as guides on this path should have at least attempted the journey themselves.

References


How Self-Awareness Promotes Personal Growth

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