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ABSTRACT

Counselor education programs must provide effective educational opportunities for counselors-in-training (CIT) to learn and apply theoretical conceptualizations. This qualitative research study explored the use of music as a creative method with CIT to develop their understanding and application of theoretical conceptualization. Four themes emerged from a thematic analysis of the data: (1) desire for real world examples, (2) engagement in practical application of theory, (3) appreciation for interactive experiences, and (4) difficulties with the process.

In the counseling profession there is a necessity for advanced exploration of theoretical conceptualization for counselors-in-training (CIT) to effectively understand and address a diverse array of populations and issues (Bitar, Bean, & Bermudez, 2007; Ogunfowora & Drapeau, 2008). Theory conceptualization is key in evaluating a student's pattern of behavior to develop an appropriate course of action for intervention (Hinkle & Dean, 2017; Hrovat & Luke, 2016). A greater theory understanding can result in more advanced and appropriate development of specific techniques (Minton, Morris, & Yaites, 2014). To address this need for knowledgeable counselors, it is imperative that counselor education programs continue to discover effective delivery of counseling theory education (Hansen, 2006; Nittoli & Guiffrida, 2018).

Theory development for counselors-in-training

In the most current edition of education standards established by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), counselor educators are called upon to train students on "theories and models of counseling" (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2016, p. 12). Counseling theories are linked to the worldviews of counseling students, explaining "why people behave as they do, how to help them grow, and how to change aspects of their lives if they wish to do so" (Murdock, 2017, pp. 3–4). Students' beliefs about these matters inform or influence the interventions students choose in their work (Corey, 2017; Cummings, Ivan, Carson, Stanley, & Pargament, 2014; Murdock, Duan, & Nilsson, 2012). Given that the counselor's personal allegiance to his or her approach explains 30% of treatment-related variance in client outcome (Wampold & Imel,

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2015), matching a counseling student's worldview to his or her counseling theory may be a critical task for counselor educators. This task, however, is often regarded as a complex and lengthy one requiring the management of a large body of material (Corey, 2017; Halbur & Halbur, 2015; Luke, 2017; Petko, Kendrick, & Young, 2016). Theoretical training can also be difficult due to the abstract nature of conceptualization as well as the application of concepts to specific counseling-based situations (Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007).

As students engage in processes related to theory development, they are influenced by a number of factors. Relationships between personality characteristics of students and preferred counseling theories have yielded mixed results, whereas experiences with professors, educators, supervisors, and specific class assignments have been identified as significant contributors (Hinkle, Schermer, & Beasley, 2015). Petko et al. (2016) conducted structured interviews and administered a 9-item questionnaire with 19 masters-level counseling students in a mixed-methods study. Students ranked the nine items in the questionnaire from most-endorsed examples including "I like the theory because it makes logical sense to me" (M = 6.47) and least-endorsed examples including "My supervisor or teacher subscribes to the theory" (M = 2.47). Despite a limitation of small sample size, findings from the quantitative portion of the study suggest that students identify logic, clarity, and value-congruence to be more influential in theory development than theory compatibility with religious or spiritual beliefs, past experiences in the field, and influence from professors and supervisors (Petko et al., 2016). With such emphasis on the appropriate application of theory in counseling, it is paramount for counselor educators to utilize effective pedagogy to train future counselors.

Creative pedagogy in counselor education

In traditional theory pedagogy, case study conceptualizations constitute a standard approach to teaching theory (Ellis, Hutman, & Deihl, 2013; Liese & Esterline, 2015). Recently, there has been a call for experiential means for exploring the development of counseling skills such as theoretical conceptualization in trainees (Fazio-Griffith & Ballard, 2016; Lawrence, Foster, & Tieso, 2015; Nittoli & Guiffrida, 2018). Specifically, there is a need for activities that challenge and allow for deep, abstract thought to engage counseling students in more meaningful theory conceptualization (Hinkle & Dean, 2017; Scholl, Gibson, Despres, & Boyarinova, 2014).

Creative interventions have become a more common method of education in the counselor education field. Research supports the use of creative activities in counselor education as a means for improved counselor self-awareness, greater critical thinking, and application of skills (Bell, Limberg, Jacobson, & Super, 2014; Gladding, 2016; Luke, 2017). Creative learning can result in improved student confidence, enhanced engagement, and application of skills (Dollarhide et al., 2007; Duffy, Guiffrida, Araneda, Tetenov, & Fitzgibbons, 2017). These interventions utilize activities such as improvisation (Bayne & Jangha, 2016), television media (Gary & Grady, 2015), and games (Swank, 2012). Music could be an additional means for working with counseling students as a creative activity for theoretical conceptualization training.

Music and songs have a wide application to a variety of diverse populations and can explore topics such as oppression, depression, sexuality, and violence in a familiar and creative way for counselors-in-training (Davis & Pereira, 2016; Lenes, Swank, & Nash, 2015; Minor, Moody, Tadlock-Marlo, Pender, & Person, 2013). Further, creative techniques such as music can aid in

increased engagement, more emotional investment, and richer opportunities to recognize and confront worldviews while developing appropriate interventions (Gladding, 2016; Nittoli & Guiffrida, 2018; Tromski & Dodson, 2003; Young & Hundley, 2012). Music engages the body and mind resulting in greater receptiveness and attention which can lead to increased awareness (Lenes et al., 2015; Lloyd & Smith, 2006). This increased awareness and insights aids in gaining a holistic perspective of each person and situation (Lawrence et al., 2015) while also aligning with CACREP requirements for learning and teaching of theory conceptualization and multi-cultural counseling (Minton et al., 2014). While music has gained attention as a training tool in counselor education, there is still a lack of research regarding this modality in theoretical conceptualization training.

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of counselors'-in-training using music as to learn and apply theoretical conceptualization. The research is guided by the following questions: (1) What are counselors'-in-training perceptions of using music to learn theoretical conceptualization? (2) What are counselors'-in-training perceptions of using music to gain insights into each situation? and (3) What are counselors'-in-training perceptions of applying theory in future counseling settings based on using music to learn theoretical conceptualization?

Methods

Thematic analysis is a flexible research methodology to identify, analyze, and report patterns in data sets across a wide range of areas (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Goodman-Scott, Burgess, & Carlisle, 2018; Vaismoradi, Turumen, & Bondas, 2015). The researchers employed this approach to engage and address the call for appropriate creative interventions for counseling theoretical conceptualization pedagogy. Braun and Clarke (2006) approach was utilized for the thematic analysis to gain knowledge and understanding of a group of counselors'-in-training experiences of using music as compared to traditional case studies to learn and apply theoretical conceptualization. The thematic analysis process uses a six-phase approach including: (1) becoming familiar with the data, (2) gathering initial codes, (3) identifying themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Researchers

The principal investigator is a White male counselor educator and the instructor for the course utilized in this research study. He is a certified school-counselor, national certified counselor, and a school-based registered play therapist. He has experience in teaching theory courses for several years. The additional investigators are both White male doctoral students in counselor education who are currently serving or have served as teaching assistants for the theories course utilized in the study as well as serving as currently practicing counselors.

Participants

A purposeful sample of six voluntary members of the introductory theories course at a southeastern United States public university counselor education program for the spring 2018 semester served as participants. All six counseling students voluntarily agreed to

participate in the study; however, one student withdrew from the course and was no longer eligible. All five participants were White females and were enrolled in the master's level counseling program during the study. This was the first exposure to a counseling theory course for all five of the participants.

Conceptualization activities

During the course, students completed six required theory conceptualization activities for three different counseling theories covered during the course. The three theories were selected as a representation of three key theoretical categories (Humanistic, Cognitive-Behavioral, and Post-Modern) outlined by Neukrug (2017). The theories included the following: (1) Person-Centered, (2) Reality Therapy, and (3) Feminist.

The songs were selected to represent diverse populations and issues which may be seen in a counseling setting. Participants listened to three songs (one song per theory) and processed a set of theory conceptualization questions as a group with the instructor and teaching assistant in the classroom setting. The three songs utilized in these case studies included *Fast Car* (Chapman, 1988), *A Boy Needs a Bike* (Kilcher, 2015), and *Wonderful* (Alexakis, Eklund, & Avron, 2000). The theory conceptualization prompts included: (1) Describe the presenting concern in terms of theoretical constructs, (2) How does this theory explain how these issues developed and maintained? (3) What are some possible counseling interventions that could be used based in the identified theory? (4) What are the possible benefits of this theory with this particular issue? and (5) What are the possible hindrances of this theory with this particular issue?

Procedure

The researcher obtained approval to conduct the study through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to the beginning of the course. The study met all requirements for the ethical treatment of participants as outlined by the American Counseling Association *Code of Ethics* (2014). While student participation in the case example discussion was a required portion of the course, participation in the questionnaire was completely voluntary and could be discontinued at any time without repercussion on their grade or standing in the course or program. At the beginning of the course, the primary researcher explained the study and provided each student with an informed consent document. The students were provided some time to process and discuss their decision to participate as well as an envelope to submit any signed informed consents. All members of the class agreed to participate in the study, signed the informed consent documents, and sealed them in the envelope which was then returned to the instructor. The sealed envelope with the signed informed consent documents was locked in a file cabinet in the instructor's office.

For each case discussion, participants completed a questionnaire regarding their experience with the activity. The questions included: (1) What was this experience like for you? (2) How did the music help your conceptualization of the theory for the situation? (3) What was beneficial about this experience? (4) What was not helpful about this experience? (5) How did this experience help you understand the theory? and (6) How do you see this experience assist you in applying the theory for potential future practice?

The questionnaires were emailed to the students after class to be completed and returned the following week. The students provided pseudonyms and submitted their hard-copy questionnaire results via manila envelope provided as they entered class to aid in confidentiality of their responses. Further, the responses were not reviewed until the course was completed to avoid any potential impact on the course experience and data analysis.

Data analysis

A constructivist approach was employed in this qualitative study to explore the perceptions of counselors-in-training using music and case studies to learn theoretical conceptualization. This approach was selected because it honors the participants' understanding of their experiences and can relate their perceptions of the teaching experiences in a meaningful and relevant manner (Grbich, 2013). This understanding of inner experiences of participants can equal a deeper level of inquiry (Hill, 2012). The questionnaires were analyzed using a thematic analysis methodology to glean the phenomenological experiences of the participants. This approach identifies, analyzes, and reports patterns or themes within the data to organize and comprehend the perceptions, experiences, and potential needs of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Upon completion of the course, the questionnaires were removed from the sealed envelopes. Each questionnaire was reviewed by the primary researcher to identify significant statements provided regarding the participants' experiences and were grouped into themes or meaning units as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). In qualitative research, researchers completely immerse themselves in the data by constantly reviewing the materials and making notes as themes being to emerge (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An open coding procedure was used to examine the questionnaires for distinct segments and sort them into categories that emerge (Grbich, 2013; LaRossa, 2005). Throughout this process, the data were dissected into recurring words and phrases that could create the basis of repeated patterns or themes. Subsequently, the researcher collaborated with the qualitative research consultant to discuss coding of the data and organize the categories and sub-categories that describe common themes that emerge from the process. The data were then grouped into new combinations by identifying relationships between the categories. Finally, the coding process linked the categories together into a specific set of categories to address the research question. The researcher and collaborators reviewed and refined the final results to ensure that there was a complete consensus on the thematic content and phrasing of the results.

Trustworthiness

Throughout the data analysis process, several trustworthiness strategies were employed to establish credibility and rigor. For instance, the principal investigator and second and third authors met to discuss any potential assumptions and biases that could exist and influence the data collection and analysis processes. Assumptions based on personal experiences as counselors and counselor educators were identified and related to experiences with creative counselor education interventions as well as their own counseling theory educations. Identifications and acknowledgment of these assumptions implies that the researchers' beliefs have less chance of impacting the perceptions of the participants in the final results (Patton, 2015).

Member checking was also used in this study as a measure of the accuracy and trustworthiness of the data analysis (Patten, 2007). Participants were contacted by e-mail and provided findings of the data analysis to review and offer any additional feedback, information, or questions. The participants reported agreement with the findings in terms of the accuracy of the ideas and comments. Peer debriefing was also utilized to enhance trustworthiness (Patton, 2015). This process involved a review by two colleagues with significant counselor education experiences to review and discuss the data analysis process and results of the study. Final efforts that were employed to enhance the study's trustworthiness included reflective journaling for transparency, an audit trail of the data analysis process, and a constant comparison method during the data analysis to represent a rich and full emersion into the data (Patten, 2007).

Results

The primary objective of this study was to understand the perceived experiences of CIT's theory conceptualization using music. Based on the data analysis, four themes emerged related to these experiences: (1) desire for real world examples, (2) engagement in practical application of theory, (3) appreciation for interactive experiences, and (4) difficulties with the process. Each theme is discussed further in this section with quotes from the participants that illustrate their experiences. Pseudonyms are used for the participants to maintain confidentiality.

Desire for real world examples

The participants identified the importance of real work examples in their theory education and conceptualization. In particular, they emphasized the desire for realistic cases to help connect with and identify presenting issues. For instance, Kelva stated, "The activity was relatable to things in my everyday life. It was nice to be discussing a real-world situation." This was also the case for Virginia who shared, "Listening to music lyrics was similar to a real-life session with a client … It was nice to be able to learn about her life through song. It was a real experience." Cynthia further emphasized the positive effects of real-world examples by sharing, "By using a real-world example of something we may experience was helpful in seeing how this theory could work for us. Being able to process how the theory works in real life with diverse populations is so helpful in seeing its benefits." Kelly discussed her experience with the 'real-world activity' being positive as it "helped me understand her life journey from beginning to end." She also added that the music activity allowed for "hearing the situation, feeling the emotions from the client" which was beneficial in her experience. Robin's experience had a similar tone with the emphasis on feeling with her comment, "We were able to discuss what the girl was going through and how she may be experiencing her life and culture." Thus, participants recognized the benefits of engaging in realistic examples.

The participants further noted the link of the cases reflecting potential counseling-based examples as a benefit of engaging in the activities. For Cynthia, the activities provided "the practice using the theory on a case that we will most likely see in our career" as a benefit. Virginia shared, "Definitely the fact that it was a real-life example that we would encounter as a school counselor." She continued to discuss this important aspect

by sharing, "It helped me learn about the client through their eyes and own words. This will help me work with students in real work because I will have to see the client through their eyes." Kelly also noted, "I see this as being very helpful because this is a real-world situation that could happen in any counseling atmosphere." For Robin, the real-world aspect was useful because "the student was going through a very likely and common scenario experienced by students." Thus, participants were able to identify the benefits of linking the examples to realistic situations.

Finally, the participants expressed the value of drawing on this experience for future use as a counselor. Kelva noted, "Since this experience had a real-world application, it allowed for me to reflect upon techniques to apply for future practice." Virginia also shared that "In the future, I will be able to look back and remember how I responded during the case study. This will help remind me about this therapy and how to apply it." She further this thought in her statement: "I will be able to look back on this case and how we worked through it." This was also the case for Cynthia who noted that the activities "provide more tools to put in my toolbox for future work. The exercises gave us experience using them, which makes me more confident using them in the future." Increased confidence was also discussed by Kelly who shared, "I am able to understand this theory much better now because of this activity; therefore, I am able to move forward and feel confident." She was even able to provide some specific examples with "techniques such as sand box and role play" as potential tools she could use with some of the cases. Hence, participants identified the advantage of building on potential skills and interventions that could be utilized in future counseling interactions.

Engagement in practical application of theory

In conjunction with the positives of exploring real-world examples, the ability to actively engage in discussion and practice with applying theoretical ideas and techniques was noted as beneficial by the participants. This positive engagement was noted in several different ways. In particular, the participants discussed the appreciation of engaging in activities that were familiar as part of their counselor training experiences thus far. For Cynthia, "It was an enjoyable experience. I always feel like these are valuable practice experiences … the practice is always beneficial as well as using our interpretation skills." Thus, participants recognized the benefits of participating in familiar formats for theory development.

The participants also noted the benefits of experiencing opportunities to explore specific skills and interventions of the theories with the activities. Kelva shared that "The case study allowed me to interact with the theory through role play. It allowed me to participate in a real-life situation and made me feel like I have a good understanding of the theory as a whole" and "it allowed me to focus on the key points and techniques of the theory." For Virginia, "The experience of learning a case study and trying to evaluate it using the therapy we just learned about was really positive. I was able to listen and figure out what emotions Tracy was feeling within the lyrics." Cynthia also shared, "I felt this case study practice was a very beneficial experience. We were able to process how to use a new theory with guidance to help us understand real counseling skills. It helped us to use our skills to interpret what the client was telling us. I think this helps us learn how to interpret information better." Overall, the participants noted the value of being able process skills and theory in the moment.

Appreciation for interactive experiences

Beyond meeting a desire for real world experiences and engagement in practical application of the theories, the participants also discussed their appreciation for an interactive learning experience. Specifically, the students commented on interacting with peers. For Virginia, having feedback from peers is helpful because "I enjoy hearing others' thoughts in the class" as this is "nice to work through a specific client's case with classmates to understand the theory from the case example." This was also the case for Cynthia who commented, "We were able to use suggestions from classmates and process the theory together. This helps to generate a new perspective and if you are struggling with any aspects, they help you with it." She furthered this concept by sharing, "I was able to practice and develop the skills and get feedback from classmates" and that ultimately "practicing with classmates and sharing ideas are the most beneficial parts of the experience." Kelly also noted her appreciation for the peer interaction with her comment, "It was interesting to hear everyone's thoughts and perspectives on how to apply the theory to the case." For Robin, she "liked discussing the ways we could get the client to dispute why she felt like she needed to lose weight." Hence, participants were able to identify profit in sharing insights with peers for theory conceptualization.

The participants also expounded upon their personal connections with the activities, especially related to the music-based theory conceptualization activities. For example, Virginia noted, "I definitely enjoyed listening to the song and being able to dissect the meaning as well" and "I enjoyed listening to the lyrics to understand the client's view." She also discussed how "this was a really good song, as I enjoyed it and was able to understand the message behind it. I always enjoy listening to songs for this … I was able to hear the passion behind the client and learn directly how the boy thinks of specific things." Kelly reported that "The activity was helpful to apply techniques of the therapy to the student's situation and to hear potential possibilities that came from that" and that "using music makes you feel, visualize, and conceptualize each line, detail, lyric, and story of the entire song so you are able to understand the theory better." She further discussed her connection to the music in her comment, "I like the songs because you can feel the pain, hear the anger or sadness. The music allows for the story and emotion all in one to understand the experience better." Ultimately, Kelly noted, "I liked the experience. I enjoy the music, stories that play out to allow me to understand the theory through a different lens." This connection to the experience was also described by Robin who shared, "I need practical applications and this provided a complicated student that was very real to practice with. I would like to do more of these." She continued by noting that the activity was "eye-opening. I've never really dissected that song and though about what is was actually saying. It really made me listen to her story and put her at the center of what I was thinking" and "this song was a great way to present a case study." Thus, the participants identified the importance of connecting to learning activities for greater impact.

Difficulties with the process

Participants also discussed aspects of the activities that provided difficulty. For instance, they noted some confusion with the overall concepts of the theories. In particular, Virginia shared, "This experience was a bit difficult for me. The theory was presented differently so

it's hard for me to understand how it is different from the other theories. I understand the basics but am still a bit confused." While Virginia did not note an issue with the activity, she did discuss how "It would have been interesting to see a different case that would be difficult to use this theory. I would want to see my professor's and classmates' responses." Hence, participants found a voice to identify gaps in their theory understanding.

Participants noted a second area of difficulty related to the lack of detail provided in the situation. For Virginia, "The specific topic of this case was hard for me to work through because I did not have all of the information" and "at points, it was a bit confusing." Cynthia echoed this concern by sharing, "We were not provided enough information that we would have been given in real life. We were not able to determine if there actually was a problem of just disagreement with parents." In Kelly's case, "It was frustrating not to have the entire story of the student" and that "Not knowing the whole story, trying to guess, assume, or attempt to place myself in her shoes is difficult." This sentiment was also expressed by Robin in her statement, "It is impossible in made-up case studies to know all of the details you would get in a real scenario" and that "The brevity of the song does not allow you to get more out of the client making it hard to decide what approach to take." Note taking was an issue for Kevla who shared, "It is fully auditory so without taking notes it could be possible to lose valuable information." Overall, the participants identified their need for further details to fully understand the situation.

Discussion

The results indicate that music can be a successful means for making the application of theory more relevant, personable, and enjoyable for counselors-in-training. One of our most consistent findings is that all participants noted the experience as beneficial and it aided in developing a richer understanding of theory conceptualization. Overall, the four emerging themes revealed a variety of insights and applications of the experience for the participants.

The theme of desire for real world examples is consistent with counselor education literature. As noted by the participants, the need for reliable and realistic examples of common issues that may be seen in a counseling setting is consistent for counselors-in-training (Nittoli & Guiffrida, 2018). This need for authentic training experiences is of particular importance considering the copious amounts of theoretical orientations utilized in counseling in conjunction with the increased complexity of counseling issues and situations (Halbur & Halbur, 2015; Luke, 2017). By providing a diverse array of potential counseling situations to process through theoretical lenses, counselor educators can help students think like a counselor to at a deeper applicable level. As a result, counselors can employ a more intentional theoretical foundation as opposed to a 'bag of tricks' approach to theoretical conceptualization (Dollarhide et al., 2007; Minton et al., 2014). As a result, the learning environment becomes richer and more meaningful for counselors-in-training to increase theoretical knowledge as well as a longer-lasting reminder for subsequent application in practice.

The second theme addressed the participants' engagement in practical applications of theory. Participants discussed the importance of participating in experiences that are familiar and immediate for theory application and practice. Lenes et al. (2015) noted the impact of music as a learning tool to help students connect to the both content and their peers with a familiar medium which result in a richer learning environment and

enhanced personal development. Further, building on personal experiences based on the connection with the music can deepen the learning experience (Davis & Pereira, 2016; Luke, 2017). The findings support the research of Hrovat and Luke (2016) stating that when CITs are able to utilize personal experiences, they will be able to gain a deeper level of reflection and understanding of personal theory. Making these connections can assist students in finding a more personally compatible theoretical approach resulting in more effective counseling (Cummings et al., 2014; Murdock et al., 2012). Through this style of experiential learning, counselors-in-training may develop a stronger connection to the theory conceptualization process resulting in more effective understanding and intervention when working with various populations.

For the third theme, participants expressed an appreciation for interactive experiences in learning theory conceptualization. They discussed how the processing various songs with peers was beneficial in gaining new perspectives on theory understanding and application. Music can be particularly functional in helping connect with others resulting in a beneficial group learning environment (Lenes et al., 2015). These connections can provide a substantial process for learning and application of theory (Hinkle et al., 2015; Luke, 2017). Further, this supportive experience and environment can assist students in addressing potentially uncomfortable situations. Bell et al. (2014) noted how the use of creative activities can enhance discussions related to difficult issues for CITs. The participants emphasized the value of engaging with their peers for feedback and fresh insights for theory conceptualization in a safe environment.

The final theme was related to the difficulties associated with the use of music for theoretical conceptualization. The participants noted a variety of issues with the songs including confusion with various aspects of the theory as they related to the situations presented in the music as well as frustration with the lack of detail and ambiguousness in the songs. As with any novel pedagogical approach, issues will emerge that need to be evaluated and modified to understand the effects on potential learning outcomes (Bell et al., 2014; Duffy et al., 2017). Consequently, it is important to utilize a variety of other activities (e.g. discussion, writing, etc.) in conjunction with the creative exercise for full and rich experiences (Bell et al., 2014; Nittoli & Guiffrida, 2018). While there was a detailed process of the situations and theoretical conceptualizations, the participants still noted the aforementioned difficulties which could affect the effectiveness of this particular learning tool.

Implications for theory conceptualization

The present study focused on the exploring the experiences of a group of counselors-in-training who participated in theoretical conceptualizations process utilizing music. When training students to conceptualize theory, it is essential to provide experiences to engage in creative and practical application of the theoretical components to enhance theory understanding and conceptualization. Overall, our participants discussed the value in engaging in exercises noting the personal connection to the music as well as feeling a greater ability to apply the theory to diverse situations. This engagement in familiar and creative mediums like music can be beneficial; thus, counselor educators may enhance the learning environment with the implementation of creative pedagogy.

In counselor training, it is imperative that students are presented with multiple opportunities to explore culturally diverse situations through theoretical lenses. Music

provides a wealth of cultural, developmental, and mental health issues that can be processed and conceptualized. Music holds strong personal connections for human beings (Davis & Pereira, 2016). The utilization of meaningful personal aspects in counselor training can be of great benefit. Consequently, allowing students to select the songs that are used in the conceptualization activity has the potential to increase the variety of music as well as deepening the personal connection to the content resulting in stronger retention. Making personal connections facilitates a greater avenue for exploring difficult topics related to issues such as race, culture, gender, and power.

In the counselor education process, group connection and rapport are vital for full engagement and learning (Dollarhide et al., 2007). Music is a common connector for people and allows for multiple perspectives and interpretations for discussion. This multitude of issues and insights can be overwhelming and hinder the learning experiences if not processed with purpose. Consequently, when utilizing music in the theory conceptualization process it is recommended that songs are researched to fully understand any information, themes, or issues that may exist. This depth of understanding can assist in the processing of the situation and application of theory conceptualization of the case. Further, utilizing a variety of process means can also strengthen the learning experience for students. For instance, processing the song and theory conceptualization in small groups with role plays or through writing can bolster the experiential activity. Finally, it is essential that the activity is concluded with a discussion to address any confusion related to the situation and for closure.

Limitations and future research recommendations

Some limitations were present in this research study. The qualitative methodology employed in the study does not seek to provide generalizable results. Rather, the goal is to provide an in-depth exploration of the perceptions and experiences of the participants. The results may also be limited due to the collection of data solely from a volunteer self-selected set of school counselors-in-training in the same class. Additionally, the participants that volunteered to participate were all white and female. It is possible that school counselors-in-training from differing gender or racial backgrounds have unique lived experiences related to music and theory conceptualization that are not captured in this study. It would also be beneficial to expand the participant populations to school counselors-in-training at a variety of institutions to explore a larger sample size in diverse settings. Steps were implemented to address confidentiality; however, there may have also been influence because the researcher was also the instructor of the course. Considering that all of the participants were starting the program, exploring perceptions and experiences of school counselors-in-training at later stages of training (e.g. internship) may also help to expand the research in this area. Finally, while the researchers abided by a thorough thematic data analysis process, it is possible that a preconceived bias could have affected the analysis. Future studies could include additional team members not affiliated with the course to assist in the data analysis. These limitations are meant to serve as a starting point for addressing future research. For instance, future studies might include in-person interviews in conjunction with questionnaires for a potentially richer data set. It may also be fruitful to explore the inclusion of music provided by the students as well as addressing specific issues (e.g. homosexuality, suicide, etc.) as adaptations to the use music for theoretical conceptualization in counselor education.

Conclusion

Developing theory knowledge can be overwhelming and confusing for students. Experiential exercises utilizing mediums such as music offer a safe and familiar setting for process and discussion resulting in enhanced personal and academic experiences. Thus, counselor educators may consider the use of music as a teaching tool to better prepare for theory conceptualization and application.

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