A Pilot Study of Empathy and Counselor Self-Efficacy Among Graduate Students in a Predominantly Hispanic Counseling Psychology Program

Mónica E. Muñoz, George Potter, and Mary R. Chavez
Emotional intelligence (EI) models suggest that emotional competencies can be developed to achieve optimal performance in various areas. The construct has been linked to successful academic and career performance. One profession that may benefit from targeted training in emotional intelligence skills is counseling psychology. The current study examined the relationships between emotional intelligence skills, perceived counselor self-efficacy, and dispositional empathy dimensions in a first year cohort of counseling psychology graduate students. Identifying those emotional skills most strongly related to feelings of counseling self-efficacy may help in designing targeted training for future programs.

Introduction

The term Emotional Intelligence suggests a general capacity that is innate and includes emotional competences which can be developed to achieve optimal performance (Goleman, 1998). A first formal theory by Salovey and Mayer (1990) presented Emotional Intelligence as a set of abilities that contribute to accurate appraisal, expression, and regulation of emotions in oneself and others, as well as the use of emotions as motivation toward achievement. Researchers find that Emotional Intelligence is a factor in one’s emotional well-being (Taylor, Parker & Bagby, 1999) and a significant predictor of success in one’s academic and work performance (Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan, & Majeski, 2004).

Recent research findings suggest that overall Emotional Intelligence may be important in identifying those oriented towards a career in counseling (Martin, Easton, Wilson, Takemoto, & Sullivan, 2004). Additionally, emotional intelligence has been found to be related to counseling self-efficacy (Martin, et al., 2004). Counseling self-efficacy (CSE) is one’s subjective assessment about his or her capabilities to counsel, and it is positively related to counselor training level (Larson & Daniels, 1998). According to Larson et al (1992), counseling self-efficacy can be understood in terms of five dimensions: confidence in executing microskills, attending to process, dealing with difficult client behaviors, behaving in a culturally competent way, and being aware of one’s own values.

As mastery of counseling skills increases, trainees develop more confidence in their skills and, in turn, more effectiveness as counselors. According to Larson and Daniels, those with strong CSE beliefs are more likely to persevere in the face of difficult counselor tasks. If there is a strong relationship between dimensions of emotional intelligence and counseling self-efficacy, counseling psychology graduate students could benefit greatly from training to develop key emotional intelligence skills related to confidence in their professional counseling performance.

The relationship between Emotional Intelligence and counseling self-efficacy may be further illuminated by examining empathy. While it has been well documented that empathy is necessary for a successful counselor-client relationship (Clark, 2010; Rogers, 1957), and that expert counselors list empathy among the top five personal characteristics of effective counselors (Pope & Kline, 1999), the relationship between empathy and counseling self-efficacy has not been investigated sufficiently. Counselor training models tend to emphasize the acquisition of intuitive skills that include empathy (e.g., Smaby, Maddux, Torres-Rivera & Zimmick, 1999), or at least the ability to act empathic, even without the actual experience of empathy (Greason & Cashwell, 2009). The increased training-related feeling of being empathic may enhance beliefs of counselor self-efficacy.

Empathy and Emotional Intelligence, however, have long been linked. Davis’s (1983) multidimensional view of empathy includes the affective component of empathic concern and


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Author Note
Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to any of the following:

George Potter, Ed.D.
5201 University Blvd, KL 426D,
Laredo, TX 78041
George.potter@tamiu.edu.