

How beginning counselors learn: The interaction of personal and professional experiences in counselors with an experiential orientation

Lenka Maruniakova, Tomas Rihacek & Jan Roubal

To cite this article: Lenka Maruniakova, Tomas Rihacek & Jan Roubal (2016): How beginning counselors learn: The interaction of personal and professional experiences in counselors with an experiential orientation, *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, DOI: [10.1080/09515070.2016.1148013](https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070.2016.1148013)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09515070.2016.1148013>



Published online: 23 May 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

How beginning counselors learn: The interaction of personal and professional experiences in counselors with an experiential orientation

Lenka Maruniakova*, Tomas Rihacek and Jan Roubal

Faculty of Social Studies, Department of Psychology, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

(Received 15 September 2015; accepted 26 January 2016)

Research suggests that the way counselors work is influenced not only by training and practice but also by their personal experiences and qualities. In this study, we aimed to explore how beginning counselors with an experiential orientation integrate the experiences from different sources (e.g. training, supervision, individual therapy, practice, and their personal life) and how they utilize them in practice. Seven in-depth interviews with beginning Gestalt-oriented counselors were conducted and grounded theory method was used for analysis. The results show that personal experiences and qualities play an important role in shaping the way beginning Gestalt counselors work. We conceptualized two main components of counselors' working style – Personal Core and Professional Extension, and 10 specific types of interaction between these components which were subsumed into two broad categories: (1) cultivation of personal qualities and (2) adoption of new competencies. These findings challenge earlier assumptions that beginning counselors simply imitate their trainers, supervisors, and senior colleagues. Implications for further research and use in practice are discussed.

Keywords: beginning counselors; counselor development; counselor training; personal and professional experiences; working style

Several empirical studies suggest that counselors and psychotherapists tend to form their own, personalized working styles during their professional development (Carlsson, Norberg, Sandell, & Schubert, 2011; Rihacek, Danelova, & Cermak, 2012; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1992; Vasco & Dryden, 1997). A similar conclusion can be drawn from autobiographic literature (e.g. Goldfried, 2005) and from workbooks and texts intended for counseling and psychotherapy trainees (Bager-Charleson, 2012; McLeod, 2010) and trainers (Spruill & Benschoff, 2000).

In their seminal study on psychotherapist development, Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) came to the conclusion that beginning therapists lack autonomy and tend to imitate their trainers and supervisors rigidly. Other authors also made this observation (e.g. Stoltenberg, 1981). Several studies, however, suggest that even trainees at the beginning of their career can base their selections and development on personal characteristics and preferences (Auxier, Hughes, & Kline, 2003; Carlsson et al., 2011; Pascual-Leone, Rodriguez-Rubio, & Metler, 2013).

*Corresponding author. Email: 273565@mail.muni.cz

Personalization of one's counseling or therapeutic approach, that is, adjusting the approach a counselor has been trained in to his or her own nature and disposition, inevitably involves the interaction of a counselor's personal characteristics and professional influences. Several recent studies, described below, have demonstrated the importance of personal aspects in professional development. These studies cover several overlapping areas: (1) choice and development of theoretical orientation, (2) development of a personal theory of counseling and psychotherapy, and (3) professional identity formation.

Choice and development of theoretical orientation

Concerning the first area, Arthur (2001) concluded in his review that the research evidence showed differences in personality and epistemological styles between cognitive behavioral and psychodynamic psychotherapists. Furthermore, newer studies confirmed the relationship between a theoretical orientation of a counselor or therapist, on the one hand, and the personality characteristics or philosophical worldview of a counselor or therapist (Poznanski & McLennan, 2003; Tremblay, Herron, & Schultz, 1986) or a trainee (Boswell, Castonguay, & Pincus, 2009; Buckman & Barker, 2010; Taubner, Kächele, Visbeck, Rapp, & Sandell, 2010; Varlami & Bayne, 2007) on the other.

In their qualitative study on marriage and family therapists, Bitar, Bean, and Bermúdez (2007) identified five broad categories reflecting the influence of therapists' personal characteristics and background on the development of their theoretical orientation, namely personality, personal philosophy, family of origin, the therapist's own therapy, and the therapist's own marriage. Therapists' experiences gained in their family of origin and in their own marriage led to sensitivity toward theories similar to these experiences. Furthermore, the authors concluded that the therapists tended to choose theories personally beneficial for treating issues rising from their family of origin experience.

Vasco and Dryden (1994) showed that therapists of different theoretical persuasions assign different weights to different variables when selecting a theoretical orientation, humanistic and psychodynamic therapists stressing the orientation of their own personal therapists, systemic therapists emphasizing their family experiences, and behavior and cognitive therapists prioritizing research evidence. Their study did not answer the question of whether it was the therapist's personality giving preference to certain variables or whether it was the training which influenced the therapist's priorities. According to Taubner et al. (2010), however, therapists' attitudes remain stable during training and their theoretical orientation seems to be rather predetermined. On the other hand, Vasco and Dryden (1994) assume that an experience of dissonance between therapists' personal beliefs and the theoretical and metatheoretical assertions of the chosen theoretical orientation may arise due to their personal or professional development and may lead to a change in theoretical orientation.

Development of a personal theory of counseling and psychotherapy

Studies in the second area indicate that personal influences also manifest themselves in the development of a personal therapeutic theory. In her review, Najavits (1997) summarizes that therapists develop an implicit theory of therapy, aside from the explicit therapeutic theory provided by a particular theoretical orientation. This implicit theory

of therapy is based on therapists' personal assumptions about therapy, personal philosophy, values, and experiences. Furthermore, it may include personal strategies of what to do (i.e. what is helpful) or not to do (i.e. what is detrimental) during sessions. According to Najavits, implicit theory of therapy might be reflected to various degrees and may differ more or less from the explicit theory. Fitzpatrick, Kovalak, and Weaver (2010) found that counselor trainees develop their initial theories of practice in a process of tentative identification with various existing theories. In their study, Howard, Inman, and Altman (2006) described that building a conceptual framework or philosophy of counseling might also be influenced by a trainee's personality. A particular part of a theory was incorporated by trainees if it resonated with them or made sense in an applied context. The assumption that practitioners develop their own personal theory of counseling or psychotherapy is also supported by Boswell et al.'s (2009) study demonstrating that when trainees were asked about being influenced by various theoretical orientations they tended to cluster not according to the pure, traditional theoretical orientations (e.g. psychodynamic or cognitive behavioral) but partially across these orientations.

Professional identity formation

The last of the reviewed areas, counselor and therapist professional identity development, has been addressed by a few studies. Almost by definition, a counselor's professional identity is an arena for recasting incoming professional influences into a more or less coherent system connected with the counselor's personality. Howard et al. (2006) arrived at professional identity as one of the main categories describing trainees' struggle throughout their training, covering personal identification with the counselor role, recognition of new or unfamiliar responsibilities, thoughts about counseling as a career, and motivation to remain in the counseling profession. Nelson and Jackson (2003) explored counselor trainees' professional identities in more depth and described a set of categories providing reflection of the process of trainee professional socialization. Using the grounded theory method, Auxier et al. (2003) conceptualized the recycling identity formation process which involves conceptual and experiential learning experiences that helped the participants form a progressively clearer personal counseling identity, reflecting and questioning their self-concepts.

Aim of study

Given the areas reviewed above, we can expect complex patterns of interaction between personal and professional influences in the course of counselors' professional development. Yet, the process of integration of the professional self and the personal self (a theme named by Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1992) has not been explored in depth. The idea of personalization still remains largely unexplored and is often pejoratively referred to as syncretism – an uncritical and unsystematic combination of therapist favorite techniques or procedures which are more determined by a therapist's mood than being empirically based (Norcross & Newman, 1992). Taking into consideration its assumed ubiquity, it needs to be given more research attention. As Hill, Sullivan, Knox, and Schlosser (2007) conclude, there is a need to revise the assumptions about how beginning counselors learn and integrate new elements.

The aim of this study was to explore ways in which personal and professional aspects interact in the development of trainees with an experiential orientation. The authors' pre-existent understanding was informed by the concept of Personal Therapeutic Approach (Rihacek et al., 2012). On a sample of seven integrative therapists, Rihacek et al. found that Personal Therapeutic Approach was not a fully realized but rather a retrospectively recognized goal of the therapists' development. It can be defined as a personalized working style which includes both a manifest, behavioral component and a cognitive or conceptual component, and the content of which is determined mainly by congruence with a therapist's personal characteristics and by its effectiveness (as perceived by the therapist). Given the exploratory nature of the research question, grounded theory method was used. As described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the method is based on inductive generation of a theory through the method of constant comparison. Though the original formulation of grounded theory methodology reflects the positivist epistemological foundations, in the present study, it was employed in accordance with Charmaz's (2006) constructivist reformulation, reflecting a researcher's co-constructive role in creating the theory.

Method

Participants

Counselors

This study was based on interviews with seven beginning Czech counselors. The participants' theoretical orientation was experiential (Gestalt). The group of participants was composed of three women and four men, aged from 26 to 47 ($M = 34.1$), whose practice ranged from 1.5 to 4 years ($M = 2.0$) and who had so far seen from 7 to 30 clients ($M = 15.4$). Though the participants were in different phases of their training, all of them were actively practicing counseling at the time of the interviews. The participants' characteristics are summarized in Table 1. To ensure anonymity, fictional names are used.

All of the trainees were trained in one particular Gestalt therapy¹ training institute. This training works on a private, part-time basis and lasts 5 years. Candidates may apply for admission after completing their BA or MA in psychology or another helping profession. During the first two years, trainees participate in a group-based personal

Table 1. Participants' characteristics.

Nickname	Age	Profession	Year of training	Years of practice	Number of clients up to now
Evelyn	26	Psychology	Third year	1.5	7
Diane	38	Psychology	Fifth year	1.5	10
John	28	Psychology	Fifth year	1.5	30
Zac	30	Psychology	Fifth year	1	9
Isabel	47	Psychology	Fifth year	4	12
Adam	35	Psychology	After fifth year, but before final exam	1	25
Michael	35	Teaching, special pedagogy	Finished 2 years ago	4	15

therapy. The remaining years of the training are focused on counseling and therapeutic skills, theory, and supervision. After the 5 years, trainees usually continue their supervised practice for one or more years before they take the final exam and receive a certificate. One characteristic of the training which could have an influence on the results was that it supported trainees in the development of their personal therapeutic styles. Specifically, when training a new technical skill (e.g. how to make a contract with a client), trainees were first asked to explore their natural methods of achieving the goal. When acquiring a theoretical concept, trainees were first encouraged to formulate their own understanding of the given phenomenon before adopting the concept. Then, the trainees tried to explain and substantiate their personal approach to others and they also learned from the different opinions of other trainees. Only after this did trainers present the methodological or theoretical framework, providing trainees with the possibility to integrate it with their previously formulated personal approaches.

The decision to include trainees and counselors representing a single institute, rather than sample a variety of orientations, was motivated by our effort to keep the sample homogeneous. This allowed us to analyze one orientation in depth and focus on details, at the expense of limiting the external validity of the study to beginning counselors with an experiential orientation. Including several orientations within a single study would most probably result in a much more general and non-specific model.

Researchers

The first author was a 27-year-old woman with her MA in psychology, currently a post-graduate student and a trainee in a body-oriented psychotherapy (biosynthesis). The second author was a 36-year-old man with 10 years of part-time therapeutic practice, trained in Gestalt therapy. The third author was a 42-year-old man with 18 years of therapeutic practice, trained in Gestalt therapy.

The second and the third authors used to work as trainers in the Gestalt therapy training institute described above. At the time when this study was conducted, they were, however, not in professional contact with the participants any more. Nevertheless, to minimize the risk of this dual relationship interfering in the research process, the following steps were taken: (1) interviews were conducted by the first author who had no dual relationship with the participants, (2) the data were anonymized by the first author, thereby protecting the identity of the participants, and (3) the third author who held a senior position in the training institute did not participate in the analysis (he took part in designing the study and in the recruitment and writing phases). Participants were apprised of the process of data analysis and of all the measures to protect their anonymity. If any insecurity appeared during the interviews they were given the option to refrain from answering or to conclude the interview.

Procedure

Recruitment

Four conditions for including participants into research were determined: (1) the Gestalt training was the first counseling training for the person, (2) the duration of time since completing the training was no longer than 3 years, (3) the person was actively

involved in counseling practice, and (4) the person perceived himself or herself as a beginning practitioner.

As a method for selecting the participants, the snowball technique (Patton, 2002) was used. The technique basically consists of recruiting a few participants who then provide a researcher with referral to further potential participants and can be used in populations which are difficult to reach or where it is preferable to establish contact in an informal way. In our case, the first contact with participants was arranged by the third author who sent a proposal letter with information about the research and conditions of engagement to approximately 50 trainees. The letter was formulated as a friendly invitation made by this particular trainer rather than a formal request on behalf of the training institution. Six participants were acquired this way and one more contact was obtained through a referral from one of the six. The trainees participated on a fully voluntary basis. Informed consent was obtained orally during the interviews. Ethical principles (American Psychological Association, 2010) were followed throughout the study (IRB approval was not required by our institution).

Data collection

The first author conducted an individual semi-structured in-depth interview with each participant. Before the interviews, participants were sent a set of four questions covering the field of the study: What in your life was or is important for your practice? In which way were those things important for your working style? Are those important things interconnected in any way? If so, how did they get interconnected during your lifetime? The purpose of this step was to enable participants to have enough time and space to explore their professional development. The same questions were then used to structure the interviews. Topics brought up by the participants were then explored in more depth.

In accordance with the grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2006), each interview was immediately analyzed and the emerging concepts then influenced subsequent interviews. Following this process, the focus of subsequent interviews gradually moved to the exploration of the interaction between the personal and professional domains which were further elaborated this way. The interviews lasted from 80 to 120 min. All interviews were transcribed before analysis.

Analysis

The analysis followed the principles of grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This approach is based on the inductive creation of categories which remain firmly grounded in the data. The process of constant comparison is used to conceptualize these emerging categories and their relationships. The original Glaserian approach (e.g. Glaser, 1978) remains rooted in a positivist perspective, striving to eliminate a researcher's initial assumptions and describe reality "as is." While identical on the technical level of coding procedures, Charmaz's (2006) constructivist reformulation of the method reflects the fact that the resultant theory is not meant to be an accurate description of reality but a researcher's construction built rigorously over data. Furthermore, the data itself represent participants' accounts of their experiences rather than an objective reality. In this sense, the authors adhered to Charmaz's version of the method, reflecting the fact that their initial assumptions inevitably

influenced the research process. Here in particular, the analytical process was a process of interaction between a previously formulated concept of Personal Therapeutic Approach (Rihacek et al., 2012), which provided a basis for the researchers' preexistent understanding, and new data which enabled the researchers to further elaborate and enrich this basic concept and to conceptualize its developmental aspects. By explicating their theoretical orientations, the researchers also admit that a researcher of a dissimilar theoretical perspective may have conceptualized the results in a different way.

In the first step, which took place parallel to data creation, preliminary analysis of each interview was conducted by the first author. This analysis was guided by a more general research question: How do beginning Gestalt-oriented counselors create their own personal working style? Open coding procedures (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) were used by the first author to inductively build concepts: the transcribed interviews were divided into "meaning units" (i.e. sections conveying one main idea relevant to the research question), which were then labeled with codes. During this step, the key theme of the interaction between personal and professional domain emerged, which became the focus of a subsequent reanalysis. In the second step, all parts of the interviews, which were connected with this new, more refined analytic focus, were identified by the first author. This way, a set of 58 data excerpts was created. In the third step, this reduced data-set was then submitted to a reanalysis conducted by the first two authors. During this step, categories were created describing various types of interaction between the personal and the professional aspects of the participants' development. The logic of category creation followed the constant comparison method – a new category was created whenever a code could not be meaningfully subsumed under previously created categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and the unique conceptual quality, rather than frequency of occurrence, was crucial in this process. Nevertheless, frequencies have also been reported for each category in the Results section (showing how many participants reported a given category). These categories were conceptually elaborated and an inductively generated hierarchy was formed. During the third step, the first two authors closely collaborated and discussed each category until they reached a consensus (Hill et al., 2005). To ensure the accuracy of translation, the quotes used in the Results section were translated jointly by the first two authors.

The credibility of the results has been bolstered by (a) repeatedly analyzing the data, leading to better groundedness of categories, (b) searching for a consensus between the two analysts, and (c) being explicit about the authors' initial assumptions and theoretical orientations, which were both present in the research process.

Results

Our analysis led to the conceptualization of two basic components of the counselor working style: Personal Core and Professional Extension. *Personal Core* represents a component which stems from participants' personal lives. It consists of personal characteristics, natural tendencies and qualities, life experiences, skills, and non-professional knowledge, as well as personal limits and weaknesses. According to our data, *Personal Core* was essential for the participants' professional development in several ways. First, *Personal Core* represented an important source of experience, personal knowledge, and skills, which may serve as a substitute for professional experience missing thus far and provide a base for professional development. Second, it played a key role in the

adoption of new elements and even in the choice of theoretical orientation – the participants tended to adopt only such techniques or concepts which were congruent with their personal view of life, values, understanding of interpersonal functioning, etc.

Professional Extension represents a component of the counselor working style consisting of theoretical knowledge, practical counseling skills, and professional attitudes. During their professional training and early counseling experience, the participants began to adopt a general counseling perspective, which means they gradually began to look at the world from a professional point of view, equipped with theoretical concepts, knowledge of psychopathology, and also with newly gained sympathy for other people's problems they would not have been able to understand before. They also began to explore their own situations and experiences on a professional basis, applying this acquired conceptual knowledge and technical skills to themselves.

In the participants' description, these two components were in continual interaction, which can be described in two broad categories: (1) *cultivation of personal qualities* and (2) *adoption of new competencies* (e.g. techniques, skills, and theoretical concepts). The categories and their relationships are depicted in Figure 1.

Cultivation of personal qualities

Cultivation represented a type of interaction in which the contents of *Personal Core* permeated *Professional Extension*, and was either used as a counseling tool or prevented from interfering with the counseling process. The contents of *Personal Core* often could not be used directly in counseling but had to be cultivated for use in the counseling context. For instance, Adam described his own experience with the death of

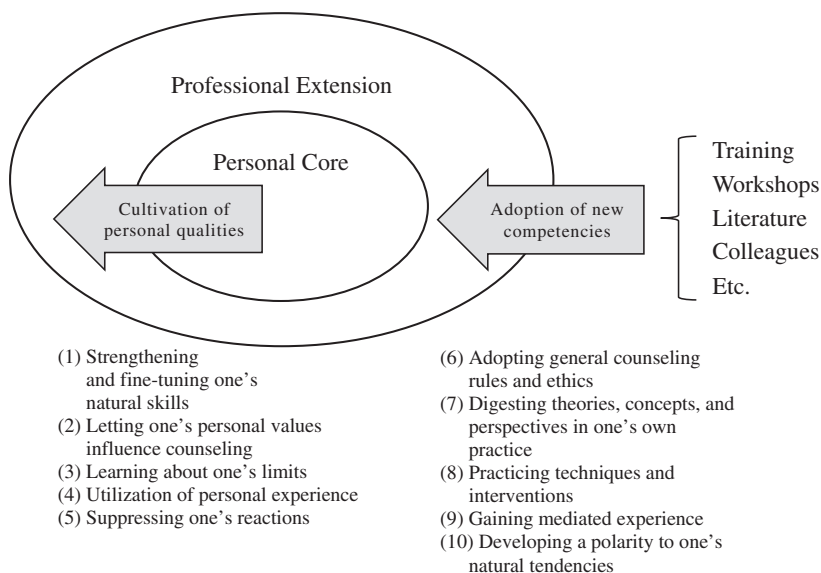


Figure 1. The interaction between personal and professional aspects during professional development.

a relative and a close friend which, when properly cultivated through self-reflection, could be used to better understand clients who brought a similar theme. In our data, *Cultivation of personal qualities* was present in several distinct forms.

Strengthening and fine-tuning one's natural skills (n = 7)

Even before they started their training, the participants already possessed some skills which they could use in counseling (e.g. playfulness, humbleness, and silence). These skills were then validated and cultivated in training thanks to the support and feedback of trainers, supervisors, and other trainees. They were supported and reinforced, when generally considered as worthwhile and beneficial, and fine-tuned, when a modification was needed for convenient use in counseling. Zac, for instance, explained how his natural humility evolved into a therapeutic skill:

I think the humility towards other people was already there in some way. But it is true that it probably evolved [in the training], in the sense that sometimes I think that the more I listen to some clients' life stories and situations the more I admire these people that they are functioning normally at all.

Using their natural tendencies brought joy to the participants and felt natural to them, as in the case of Adam, who transformed his natural playfulness into counseling and therapeutic experimentation²:

I love to play, and I love playing a game (...). When playing a game, it is about imagination and it is easy for me to invent or come up with some interventions, as my previous personal experiences in adolescence and childhood were a lot about playing, humor, and not being serious. (...) So I had a lot of space for myself to play and I play till now. (...) I like to experiment a lot, I often try exposing clients to playful situations in which they are less careful, less self-controlled. Through play, the way to a client is easier for me.

For Adam, using experiments as an intervention was an easy way of connecting to a client and establishing a good counseling relationship. The aspect of cultivation could be seen in the transition from natural playfulness to deliberate experimentation, which was guided by the counselor's intention and restricted by certain professional rules.

Personal Core served as a source of support for beginning counselors when they felt unsure or did not know what to do next in a session. John gave an example of his personal qualities which provided him with clues in counseling and which were further strengthened to serve his counseling practice:

So now there are two things, which I mentioned – the calmness and positivity which I can rely on. I consider these two things as my qualities, and I know that in some moments, when I don't know what else to do, I know that I can rely on them.

Letting one's personal values influence counseling (n = 7)

In some cases, the participants described how the counseling process was affected by their personal values and attitudes or how these personal values and attitudes were

transformed into counseling (i.e. professional) ones. Evelyn, for instance, described how her “belief in unconditional acceptance” pervaded her counseling practice:

What has, in my opinion, the biggest impact [on clients], is, well, I can't say unconditional acceptance, but the effort toward unconditional acceptance, not judging (...) I think we do miss it in our lives most (...). I think it's quite often mentioned in the therapeutic world, and I chose it as the most important thing ... because my family background is Christian, and there it is also a fairly central theme.

Similarly, Zac spoke about the emphasis he put on personal freedom and responsibility: “I don't like rules, following rules just because they are rules. I like to provoke, I like to try new things.” Even though these qualities might be ascribed to Gestalt therapy itself, Zac stated he recognized them as his own, even before entering the training.

Isabel described how motherhood changed her values. Before, she was critical with parents who got angry with their children and spanked them. However, after she became a mother herself, she started to judge these situations from a new perspective: “Earlier, I would have said: ‘shame on you.’ Now, I say: ‘It's normal, it can happen. We are just humans.’” This experience softened Isabel's therapeutic approach to her clients.

Learning about one's limits (n = 7)

Another aspect of cultivation, described by some participants, was finding out one's limitations in working with particular types of clients or problems and accepting these limitations. Several participants, for example, recognized their limits in treating violent clients:

When someone comes who is, for example, beating up his wife, I will send him to someone else who is able to help him because I am not capable to provide a good support and it would be useless to try it, it would be too taxing for me. (John)

Some participants enumerated situations or groups of clients they found difficult to work with. For Zac, these were children and elderly people, aggressive clients, as well as clients he found boring: “Since I'm fast and impatient, I wouldn't like to work with children and old people.”

Utilization of personal experience (n = 7)

Several participants described that when they see a client presenting a problem they themselves had experienced and successfully overcome in the past, it helped them connect better to their client and offered him or her more personal empathetic understanding, which, from a participant's perspective, facilitated the counseling relationship. Isabel mentioned she could better understand what her client was going through and how he or she felt:

On an emotional level, I can send out more empathetic signals when I have had a similar experience. (...) For example, I have a client who has a very complicated post-divorce situation and I feel that some aspects of her situation are very similar to my experience (...). It is as if you could feel the interconnection on an energetic level, whereas when you haven't had the experience, you try to figure it out cognitively.

On the grounds of personal experience, participants kept creating their personal idiosyncratic theory of change which served as a guideline. They used the algorithm “what helped me could help my client.” Diane, for instance, described how she drew inspiration from her personal life:

Those moments were important for me – when I dealt with my personal difficulties and the things that helped me and, on the contrary, things that were hindering or destructive. In the moments when I was in a life crisis (...), what encouraged me or what helped me to get over it, what caused some “aha” effect, was the fact that I could go one step further – these things I consider as helpful and I tend to use in therapy.

Having had an experience of their own personal therapy, the participants were also able to better acknowledge a client’s perspective and experience in a more general way. They knew what it felt like to see a counselor or a psychotherapist, how difficult it could be to share intimate issues, what clients could have on their minds during the first session, etc. Zac, for example, described how the experience of being a client provided him with a new perspective:

It is totally great, having the experience in the role of therapist and in the role of client in the same day or in the same week. That’s cool, because I know how seeing a therapist sometimes pisses me off or how I say different things than I should. From the therapist’s chair I have the impression that everything is possible and that the client can share anything with me, but even though I know that my therapist has the same approach, I will not tell him everything. The fact that one side is open to anything, is probably a condition, but it does not mean that it must necessarily happen [that the client shares everything].

Suppressing one’s reactions (n = 6)

In their training and initial practical experience, the participants also came in contact with some aspects of their personalities (e.g. feelings, opinions, memories, and spontaneous reactions) which, according to them, should not be allowed to interfere with the counseling process. If they felt unable to cultivate these aspects in a professional manner at that time, they felt they needed to learn how to put these contents or reactions aside.

The participants reflected on how during their training and personal therapy they explored their cognitive and emotional reactions toward certain themes or situations. Gaining experience with these reactions helped them distinguish between their issues and those of their clients. John, for instance, described how he dealt with his emotions inside a counseling session:

When I realize that there is something like this happening on my side, at that moment I begin stopping it and giving my feelings and emotions away, for that very moment, perhaps for the rest of the session, I try to be free of it, to stop the emotions somehow.

Suppressing one’s reactions was also connected with self-disclosure. Evelyn spoke about her doubts of sharing personal experience with her clients. She was worried about the negative impact it would have on the counseling.

The participants also did their best not to let their dysfunctional interpersonal patterns or vulnerabilities permeate into the counseling process. They reported that they

gradually built a skill to react professionally and suppressing helped them in this task by avoiding an immediate spontaneous reaction and providing more space to choose a more appropriate response. Isabel, for instance, talked about her reactions to clients blaming her:

Some time ago, those things could touch my weaknesses. And now, also thanks to the fact that I have explored my weaknesses that I worked on them now I am probably more able to bear it on a professional level and not to go into it personally, not to get drawn into it, for example, that “he blames me.” (Isabel)

Adoption of new competencies

The second type of interaction, *Adoption of new competencies*, involved accepting a new element into one's *Professional Extension*. By “element,” we mean anything that can serve as a “building block” of a working style: a theoretical concept, technique or intervention, new skill, a piece of knowledge, and one's own and other people's experience. In the beginning phase of a counselor's development, training served as a major source of these elements; the participants, however, also drew inspiration from outside their training (e.g. workshops, literature, and colleagues). In our data, adoption was rarely automatic. Instead, various elements were adopted in cases where the participants (1) felt them to be congruent with their *Personal Core* (e.g. they felt natural and authentic when performing an intervention) and (2) found them functional in the counseling process (e.g. it helped their clients to make progress or it proved useful to build a good relationship between client and counselor). Furthermore, elements of the working style were rarely adopted in their original form and were instead modified to fit the counselor and the counseling situation.

Adopting general counseling rules and ethics (n = 7)

Participants needed to learn how to establish a counseling setting (e.g. duration of a session, design of the office, and administrative activities) and what ethical rules they have to follow and why (e.g. when it is appropriate to reject a client). Getting familiarized with these principles helped the participants build a basic framework for their clinical practice. This aspect was illustrated, for instance, by John's description of his counseling practice:

So it is given by ethical rules or by something like that, these are rules given from the outside, like what is acceptable to do, for example I cannot have two relatives in counseling, yeah, these are rules set from outside.

Digesting theories, concepts, and perspectives in one's own practice (n = 7)

During their training, workshops, and while reading case studies or watching a senior counselor work, the participants adopted conceptual tools which helped them better understand the counseling process. It was, however, only through their own practical experience that they were able to appreciate their clinical relevance and adopt them into their working styles. John, for example, described how he struggled with the Gestalt concept of “contact cycle”:

The concept of contact cycle. It is something that is very abstract or it's just a construct (...), but in the end it gave me an opportunity to understand why some people have problems in different ..., why they are so different. (...) It gives me a theoretical framework.

As we can see from the quote above, when John applied theoretical knowledge to his practice, he was able to understand the differences in the problems people have, as well as in comparison with his own issues.

Practicing techniques and interventions (n = 7)

Participants described how they learned the technical aspects of counseling through instruction or observation of trainers and their personal therapists. However, they felt they truly adopted them only after trying the techniques out in their practice. The participants especially appreciated those technical tools which helped them cope with situations in which they themselves did not know what to do. In this sense, adopted techniques and interventions "filled in gaps" in participants' working styles. For example, Zac spoke about the inspiration he got from watching senior trainers' work and his own attempts to practice these interventions with his clients: "I try to use a technique or try to do something – I test it and then I find out if it fits me or not."

Gaining mediated experience (n = 7)

For the participants it was essential to find a substitute source of professional and also life experiences, especially those varying from their own. They drew these experiences from case descriptions provided by their trainers, supervisors, and other colleagues, as well as from their clients' narrations. This repertoire of substitutive experiences served as a basis for the participants' empathic understanding: "I just found out I am somehow collecting life stories faster ... So, I gather the experience through the people who live the stories" (John).

Developing a polarity to one's natural tendencies (n = 6)

In their training and practice, the participants began to recognize that some of their personal tendencies might become weaknesses or obstacles for the counseling process. On the basis of this awareness, they endeavored to explore this aspect of their personal functioning and to develop a polarity skill, that is, a skill opposite to their natural tendencies.

Diane felt she could quickly arrive at insights concerning the cause of her clients' problems. However, she discovered that she often could not share them with her clients. Instead, she had to learn to slow down and wait until the client was ready for such a "revelation:"

So patience is something I am learning. I am able to quickly map the pattern, but what I think is important for the contact is to learn to wait and endure to the moment when the client is able to change the pattern with me. (...). I have checked it up many times, that I have a tendency to do things a little while before the client is ready.

Compensating for one's weaknesses was motivated by the participants' efforts to be fully available for their clients. Although it was sometimes difficult for them, they realized that without this development they could be missing something essential for their clients' improvement and growth. For example, Michael shared how his personal tendency to avoid conflicts could be detrimental to the counseling process:

It is difficult for me to go into conflict with a client, or when it goes well in counseling to break it and go into something meaningful, but perhaps inconvenient. (...) I have developed sensors that help me realize much faster when I do it again.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the interaction between personal and professional aspects during the development of beginning counselors. Our findings generally support the observation that counselors tend to develop their personal working styles even at the beginning of their careers (Auxier et al., 2003; Carlsson et al., 2011; Pascual-Leone et al., 2013). As a result of the analysis, we conceptualized *Personal Core* and *Professional Extension* as two components of a personal working style and we elaborated two broad types of interaction between these two components which represent the directions "from inside out" (i.e. cultivation of *Personal Core* for use in one's professional role) and "from outside in" (i.e. adoption and "digestion" of external sources of inspiration).

In both directions, the participants reported considerable autonomy in respect to development of their working style. They viewed their trainers and senior colleagues as a source of inspiration, rather than objects of identification. The participants seemed to identify more with the ideas, opinions, philosophy, and/or interventions represented by their trainers, supervisors, and other senior colleagues, than with the trainers or supervisors themselves. Moreover, the participants explicitly expressed that they did not intend to imitate experienced counselors. These findings can be seen as contrary to earlier assumptions that beginning counselors and therapists imitate their trainers, supervisors or individual therapists and rigidly use the techniques and methods they are taught (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Stoltenberg, 1981). The participants' tendency not to imitate their trainers can be ascribed to the specifics of Gestalt therapy approach itself, which stresses the uniqueness of the here-and-now process of interpersonal co-creation (Roubal, Gecele, & Francesetti, 2013). Our results are based on the participants' self-reports which may reflect more their self-image rather than actual behavior. They are, however, supported by Auxier et al. (2003), who concluded that at the end of a training program beginning therapists demonstrated autonomous and supervisor-independent behavior, and by Hill et al. (2007), as well.

Existing studies have demonstrated the role of counselors' personal aspects mainly in navigating counselors to a certain theoretical orientation (e.g. Arthur, 2001; Bitar et al., 2007). In this study we have found that *Personal Core* is not only influential in the development of theoretical orientation or professional identity but permeates one's counseling work in a much deeper way. These findings point to the importance of exploring counselors' experiences, assumptions, and personal philosophies during the training phase.

Vasco and Dryden (1994) and Vasco, Garcia-Marques, and Dryden (1993) elaborated the concept of dissonance, a state of a therapist's theoretical orientation not being

congruent (or consonant, in their words) with their personal values or philosophy, which may then lead to different reactions. It is notable that our participants did not mention wrestling with dissonant/incongruent elements as a substantial issue. This finding can be explained in two ways: (1) the participants themselves had chosen the experiential orientation and, therefore, were in harmony with its principles and (2) the training under study explicitly supported the participants in developing their own working styles instead of hindering this development. From this point of view, the participants' reports on the development of personal working style could even be understood as adherence to the training's principles rather than an expression of participants' genuine autonomy. According to the interviewer's subjective impressions during personal contact with the participants, however, the latter was a more realistic explanation of the results.

In our data, there was often a synergistic effect between participants' personal values and values represented by their training. The participants chose a training which corresponded to their values and the training further strengthened these values (as captured in the categories Strengthening and fine-tuning one's natural skills and Letting one's personal values influence counseling). We may call this phenomenon "a congruence effect." This lack of dissonance, however, does not seem to be typical in early stages of counselor development. In their autobiographic narratives, a group of seasoned therapists described numerous instances of dissonance between their worldviews and the theoretical orientations of their trainings (Goldfried, 2005).

Limitations

Our findings are based on data collected within a specific group of participants who were encouraged during their training to develop their own working style and who were assured that their way of conducting counseling is valuable. This fact could have influenced the collected data in several ways. First, the striving for autonomy may not have been driven primarily by the participants' needs but may have been induced by trainers. Second, participants felt supported in exploring what fits them personally, which may have decreased their likelihood of experiencing a state of dissonance between the Gestalt approach and their own preferences. Correspondingly, one of the ideological roots of Gestalt therapy itself is anarchy (i.e. the absence of authority and pre-determined rules) which could implicate that especially this therapeutic and counseling approach emphasizes personal freedom (Aylward, 1999). Participants themselves mentioned the need to be authentic and natural in contact with clients, and the principle of holism and their emphasis on creativity and playfulness which is typical for Gestalt therapy theory and practice was also observed.

Furthermore, the results may have been influenced by self-selection bias. Only those who actively responded to our proposal letter participated. It is possible that these participants were more active and reflective of their own developmental process than others. Retrospective interviews, as a method of data collection, also represent one of this study's limits. The quality of the data depends on a participant's self-reflection and retrospective reconstruction. The results need to be understood as a report on trainees' subjective perceptions and attributions regarding the process of their development and not as an objective evaluation of this process.

The small size and specificity of the sample set limits to the generalizability of the results. The participants represent only the Gestalt-oriented approach and only one

training institute. The results of this study may most probably be generalized to trainings which are based on experiential learning and support trainee autonomy/self-reliance. Their generalizability to other theoretical orientations, and especially to manual-based trainings or trainings that require high level of adherence, remains, however, questionable and needs to be assessed through subsequent studies. Similarly, the feasibility of generalizing this concept to collectivist cultures which do not value autonomy is an issue for further research.

Implications for practice

Our research results can be used in counseling and psychotherapy trainings to support personal working style development in trainees. The basic intention of such a training could then be neither to change trainees nor to teach them to do counseling or psychotherapy the “right” way. Instead, training would empower trainees to use the resources they already possess, along with their potential in order to develop a well-grounded and personally congruent way of working.

Keeping the concepts of *Personal Core* and *Professional Extension* in mind, trainers can support both types of interaction between them. In the direction “from inside out,” trainees’ personal characteristics and values, life experiences, natural qualities and limits, non-professional knowledge, as well as already acquired skills, could be thoroughly explored with the primary aim not to change them, but to recognize them as a valuable base for their professional development. In the direction “from outside in,” theoretical knowledge, practical counseling skills, and professional attitudes would not be presented to trainees as something they have to accept but rather as a menu to choose from. Trainees could then select and try out what might be congruent with their *Personal Core* and helpful for developing their working style.

Once trainees adopt this basic attitude of relying on one’s own strengths and finding a way of working congruent with their personality, they would later be able to incorporate it into counseling sessions. After experiencing this attitude themselves during their training, they could then tailor their personal working style to the needs of their clients and present counseling and psychotherapy not as defect correction but rather as support for using clients’ own resources for their congruent self-development.

An implicit danger can be seen in participants’ uncontrolled idiosyncratic selectivity (Boswell et al., 2009; Norcross & Newman, 1992). For instance, a trainee who tends to avoid emotions in his or her life might likewise avoid opportunities to explore his or her emotions in the training and might create a working style which would be ultimately ineffective (of even harmful) in treating clients’ emotions. Another danger can be seen in focusing trainees’ attention too much on themselves and thereby disregarding the client. Nevertheless, the results suggest that these risks can be minimized by proper self-reflection and supervisory feedback (as indicated by the category *Developing a polarity to one’s natural tendencies*).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This study was supported by the Czech Science Foundation [grant number GAP407/11/0141].

Notes

1. Counseling and psychotherapy are not formally distinguished in the Czech Republic at the time when this article is being composed and we consider counseling/psychotherapy as one broad profession. For the sake of consistency, we used the words “counseling” and “counselor” throughout the article, except for quotes in which the participants explicitly used “therapy” or “therapist.”
2. In Gestalt therapy, therapeutic experimentation is a specific way of intervening where the therapist actively transforms the therapeutic situation and suggests a certain change of expression or behavior to the client (Roubal, 2009). A new experimental situation, which enhances a client’s awareness here and now, is creatively co-created during experimentation.

Notes on Contributors

Lenka Maruniakova, MA, is a psychologist and a trainee in Biosynthesis. Currently, she is a PhD student at the Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University, Brno. She is interested in the professional development of beginning therapists and counselors both from the research and training points of view.

Tomas Rihacek, PhD, is a psychologist and psychotherapist, trained in Gestalt therapy. He works as an assistant professor at the Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University, Brno. He is interested in various areas of psychotherapy and counseling research. He also has a part-time private practice.

Jan Roubal, PhD, is a psychotherapist, psychiatrist, supervisor and psychotherapy trainer. He teaches psychotherapy and psychiatry at Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic, and he also works in a private practice. He founded and leads the Training in Psychotherapy Integration and the Training in Gestalt Therapy. He has authored texts on psychotherapy in clinical practice and has co-edited two books, *Current Psychotherapy* (Portal, 2010, in Czech) and *Gestalt Therapy in Clinical Practice: From Psychopathology to the Aesthetics of Contact* (FrancoAngeli, 2013).

References

- American Psychological Association. (2010). *Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/ethics/code/principles.pdf>
- Arthur, A. R. (2001). Personality, epistemology and psychotherapists’ choice of theoretical model: A review and analysis. *European Journal of Psychotherapy, Counselling & Health*, 4, 45–64. doi:10.1080/13642530110040082
- Auxier, C. R., Hughes, F. R., & Kline, W. B. (2003). Identity development in counselors-in-training. *Counselor Education & Supervision*, 43, 25–38. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6978.2003.tb01827.x
- Aylward, J. (1999). The contribution of Paul Goodman to the clinical, social, and political implications of boundary disturbances. *Gestalt Review*, 3, 107–118.
- Bager-Charleson, S. (2012). *Personal development in counselling and psychotherapy*. London: Sage.
- Bitar, G. W., Bean, R. A., & Bermúdez, J. M. (2007). Influences and processes in theoretical orientation development: A grounded theory pilot study. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 35, 109–121. doi:10.1080/01926180600553407

- Boswell, J. F., Castonguay, L. G., & Pincus, A. L. (2009). Trainee theoretical orientation: Profiles and potential predictors. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration, 19*, 291–312. doi:10.1037/a0017068
- Buckman, J. R., & Barker, C. (2010). Therapeutic orientation preferences in trainee clinical psychologists: Personality or training? *Psychotherapy Research, 20*, 247–258. doi:10.1080/10503300903352693
- Carlsson, J., Norberg, J., Sandell, R., & Schubert, J. (2011). Searching for recognition: The professional development of psychodynamic psychotherapists during training and the first few years after it. *Psychotherapy Research, 21*, 141–153. doi:10.1080/10503307.2010.506894
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: Sage.
- Fitzpatrick, M. R., Kovalak, A. L., & Weaver, A. (2010). How trainees develop an initial theory of practice: A process model of tentative identifications. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research, 10*, 93–102. doi:10.1080/14733141003773790
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Glaser, G. G. (1978). *Theoretical sensitivity: Advances in the methodology of grounded theory*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Goldfried, M. R. (Ed.). (2005). *How therapists change: Personal and professional reflections*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Hill, C. E., Knox, S., Thompson, B. J., Nutt Williams, E., Hess, S. A., & Ladany, N. (2005). Consensual qualitative research: An update. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 52*, 196–205. doi:10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.196
- Hill, C. E., Sullivan, C., Knox, S., & Schlosser, L. Z. (2007). Becoming psychotherapists experiences of novice trainees in a beginning graduate class. *Psychotherapy Theory, Research, Practice, Training, 44*(4), 1–27. doi:10.1037/0033-3204.44.4.434
- Howard, E. E., Inman, A. G., & Altman, A. N. (2006). Critical incidents among novice counselor trainees. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 46*, 88–102. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6978.2006.tb00015.x
- McLeod, J. (2010). *The counsellor's workbook: Developing a personal approach*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Najavits, L. M. (1997). Psychotherapists' implicit theories of therapy. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration, 7*(1), 1–16.
- Nelson, K. W., & Jackson, S. A. (2003). Professional counselor identity development: A qualitative study of Hispanic student interns. *Counselor Education & Supervision, 43*, 2–14. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6978.2003.tb01825.x
- Norcross, J. D., & Newman, C. F. (1992). Psychotherapy integration: Setting the context. In J. C. Norcross & M. R. Goldfried (Eds.), *Handbook of psychotherapy integration* (pp. 3–45). New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Pascual-Leone, A., Rodriguez-Rubio, B., & Metler, S. (2013). What else are psychotherapy trainees learning? A qualitative model of students' personal experiences based on two populations. *Psychotherapy Research, 23*, 578–591. doi:10.1080/10503307.2013.807379
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Poznanski, J. J., & McLennan, J. (2003). Becoming a psychologist with a particular theoretical orientation to counselling practice. *Australian Psychologist, 38*, 223–226. doi:10.1080/00050060310001707247
- Rihacek, T., Danelova, E., & Cermak, I. (2012). Psychotherapist development: Integration as a way to autonomy. *Psychotherapy Research, 22*, 556–569. doi:10.1080/10503307.2012.688883

- Rønnestad, M. H., & Skovholt, T. M. (2003). The journey of the counselor and therapist: Research findings and perspectives on professional development. *Journal of Career and Development, 30*, 5–44. doi:[10.1177/089484530303000102](https://doi.org/10.1177/089484530303000102)
- Roubal, J. (2009). Experiment: A creative phenomenon of the field. *Gestalt Review, 13*, 263–276.
- Roubal, J., Gecele, M., & Francesetti, G. (2013). Gestalt therapy approach to diagnosis. In G. Francesetti, M. Gecele, & J. Roubal (Eds.), *Gestalt therapy in clinical practice: From psychopathology to the aesthetics of contact* (pp. 79–106). Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Skovholt, T. M., & Rønnestad, M. H. (1992). Themes in therapist and counselor development. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 70*, 505–515. doi:[10.1002/j.1556-6676.1992.tb01646.x](https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.1992.tb01646.x)
- Spruill, D. A., & Benschoff, J. M. (2000). Helping beginning counselors develop a personal theory of counseling. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 40*, 70–80.
- Stoltenberg, C. (1981). Approaching supervision from a developmental perspective: The counselor complexity model. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 28*, 59–65. doi:[10.1037/0022-0167.28.1.59](https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.28.1.59)
- Taubner, S., Kächele, H., Visbeck, A., Rapp, A., & Sandell, R. (2010). Therapeutic attitudes and practice patterns among psychotherapy trainees in Germany. *European Journal of Psychotherapy and Counselling, 12*, 361–381. doi:[10.1080/13642537.2010.530085](https://doi.org/10.1080/13642537.2010.530085)
- Tremblay, J. M., Herron, W. G., & Schultz, C. L. (1986). Relation between therapeutic orientation and personality in psychotherapists. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 17*, 106–110. doi:[10.1037/0735-7028.17.2.106](https://doi.org/10.1037/0735-7028.17.2.106)
- Varlami, E., & Bayne, R. (2007). Psychological type and counselling psychology trainees' choice of counselling orientation. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly, 20*, 361–373. doi:[10.1080/09515070701633283](https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070701633283)
- Vasco, A. B., & Dryden, W. (1994). The development of psychotherapists' theoretical orientation and clinical practice. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 22*, 327–341. doi:[10.1080/03069889408253678](https://doi.org/10.1080/03069889408253678)
- Vasco, A. B., & Dryden, W. (1997). Does development do the deed?: Clinical experience and epistemological development together account for similarities in therapeutic style. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training, 34*, 262–271. doi:[10.1037/h0087855](https://doi.org/10.1037/h0087855)
- Vasco, A. B., Garcia-Marques, L., & Dryden, W. (1993). “Psychotherapist know thyself!”: Dissonance between metatheoretical and personal values in psychotherapists of different theoretical orientations. *Psychotherapy Research, 3*, 181–207. doi:[10.1080/10503309312331333779](https://doi.org/10.1080/10503309312331333779)