Student Attitudes toward an Online Graduate Career Counseling Course

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Regardless of setting or population, counselors in mental health, school, and higher education often address work-related issues (Flores & Heppner, 2002; Lara, Kline, & Paulson, 2011; Lent, 2001). Many potential aspects of the work experience can be detrimental to mental health, such as discrimination and stereotyping (Engels, Minor, Sampson, & Splete, 1995, Lawson & Myers, 2011, Eskridge Jr., 2017), difficulty with career decision-making (Krieshok, Black, & McKay, 2009), as well as unemployment and underemployment (Boyce, Wood, Daly, & Sedikides, 2015; Cassidy & Wright, 2008). In sum, work, or lack thereof, has the potential to positively or negatively impact self-concept, worldview, and overall satisfaction with life (Mihelic & Aleksic, 2017).

Work is an important component of overall wellness (Myers & Sweeney, 2005). The link between work and personal wellness is evident in the life design paradigm of career counseling (Savickas, 2012). This framework prioritizes a narrative approach in which one's life story is constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed by ongoing identity development and the necessity of adapting to challenges throughout one's working lifetime (e.g., unexpected layoffs, underemployment, etc.). As such, when counselors and clients address work-related concerns, they are also likely to address patterns within the client's life design, such as stress, life satisfaction, interpersonal relationships, communication, and leisure (Di Fabio, 2016; Savickas, 2012). The overlap of personal and career-related concerns has been supported in existing literature (Herr, 2005; Hinkelman & Luzzo, 2007), and it is critical for graduate students in counseling to develop skills to effectively integrate a *work-lens* into their practice. This is similar the importance of developing skill and comfort with integrating drug and alcohol concerns (an *addiction-lens*) across settings and populations or continuing to work toward multicultural competency (a *diversity-lens*) to operate as an informed, the reflective practitioner (Granello & Young, 2012; Remley & Herlihy, 2014). Scholars have called for counseling training programs to emphasize the interconnected nature of personal and career-related concerns (Brown, 1985), warning that separating the two may contribute to negative student perceptions of career-counseling (Dorn, 1989).

Despite the importance of counselor competence in addressing work-related issues, there continues to be the marginalization of career counseling within the profession (Hartung, 2005; Watts, 2005). Perhaps this exposes a pervasive belief that the topic of work is less important or impactful than group therapy, couple and family counseling, or a variety of other content areas. Many counselor education programs have strayed from training students on vocational matters toward training them more directly on psychopathology, often neglecting the link between the two (Tinsley, 2001). Furthermore, overall interest in work-related issues as a field is low, and perceptions are often negative (Hartung, 2005, Lara et al., 2011; Warnke et al., 1993; Watts, 2005). In the absence of intrinsic interest in this area of the field, professional socialization toward career counseling is imperative for graduate counseling trainees (Pinkney & Jacobs, 1985). Required graduate coursework in career counseling serves as an important example of such socialization. Several studies support the concept of counseling students holding misconceptions regarding the link between career and personal counseling, and that students do not perceive career counseling as relevant to their practice in mental health counseling (Blount, Bjornsen, & Moore, 2017; Fulton & Gonzalez, 2015; Krumboltz, 1993; Lara et al., 2011; Manuele-Adkins, 1992; Warnke et al., 1993). Thus, counseling students often perceive work-related client concerns as an opportunity for referral to a specialized career counselor (Betz & Corning, 1994; Lara et al., 2011; Manuele-

Adkins, 1992; Miller, 1992; Warnke et al., 1993), neglecting to realize that the basic underpinnings of career counseling can be incorporated into general practice. This relegation of career counseling within the field trickles down to the marginalization of the career counseling course within counseling graduate programs. Further, this estrangement may be exacerbated when graduate career courses are taught in a blended or online format, potentially leading to the impression that the content is somehow less important than that of other face-to-face courses.

Review of Literature

Online Graduate Coursework

The availability of online course offerings has continued to climb in many fields in recent decades as the demand for accessible and convenient education increases (Campbell, Floyd, & Sheridan, 2002). The field of counselor education is no exception (Hall, Nielsen, Nelson, & Buchholz, 2010), as programs attempt to move with the trends and meet students' needs. This demand often stems from the proportion of adult learners who work full-time, and who may be juggling family-related commitments outside of work and school (McEwen, 2001).

The distinction must be made between courses offered in traditional classroom settings (brick-and-mortar), and courses offered in a blended or exclusively online format. Both online and blended courses (in which students meet in-person a limited number of times each semester) can pose unique challenges, such as student isolation (Desanctis & Sheppard, 1999), which may result in student attrition from their online coursework. For graduate students in human services fields such as counseling, these challenges may be amplified, as online course delivery by its very nature typically provides a reduced opportunity for the social interaction and interpersonal training that are fundamental to helping fields (Walsh & Leech, 2012). Online and blended courses can occur in either synchronous or asynchronous format, with the former requiring simultaneous engagement in a course activity by two or more students, and the instructor (Scholl, Hayden, & Clarke, 2017). Considering the stronger potential for restricted spontaneous interaction between students and with the instructor, it may be imperative for instructors to provide opportunities for students to actively engage with one another (Walsh & Leech, 2012).

Satisfaction with online coursework may vary by individual demographics. Specifically, students at the graduate level, who are married, who reside off-campus, and who identify as male may be most likely to find satisfaction with online courses (Beqiri, Chase, & Bishka, 2010). The same may hold true for students who have some degree of previous exposure or background knowledge regarding course content, as well as those who exhibit a strong preference for an online course format (Beqiri et al., 2010). Scholars have recommended that, when possible, courses being offered in a blended format as opposed to exclusively online to provide some degree of in-vivo interpersonal contact (Beqiri et al., 2010). Regardless, instructors of online and blended coursework are encouraged to clarify student goals for the course, encourage and acknowledge not only intellectual contributions by students, but also their emotional reactions to discussion material, and model effective self-disclosure relative to course content (Walsh & Leech, 2012). By best practices for boosting the engagement of students in online and blended coursework, courses should be appropriately challenging and enriching, should allow students to collaborate with one another, and should provide an opportunity for student interaction with the instructor (Suttle,

2011). Perhaps one way of facilitating these best practices objectives is through a constructivist instructional framework.

Infusing a Constructivist Framework into an Online Career Counseling Course

Instructional style may shape student attitudes and perceptions about integrating work and personal concerns. Given the fluid, interpersonal nature of the field, a constructivist instructional approach is often implemented within counselor education (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2000; Taylor, Blount, & Bloom, 2017). A constructivist framework facilitates moving from absolutist thinking to critical thinking and enhancing cognitive flexibility when faced with challenging topics (King & Kitchener, 2004; Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998). From this perspective, it is necessary to provide opportunity for exploration and deconstruction of personal experiences with work-related issues from a life-design perspective (Savickas, 2012), as well as any preconceived notions or biases about the world of work (e.g., if you do not graduate from college, you'll never get a good job). Through constructivism, counselors-in-training can experience enhanced participation, while also focusing on past behaviors and experiences that may influence their work with clients.

A constructivist approach to career course instruction facilitates students in learning through interactive experience and participating in the dynamic learning process alongside their peers and instructor (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPierto, Lovett, & Norman, 2010; Sangganjanavanich & Black, 2011). Managing the existence of parallel realities about work aids in broadening student attitudes, understanding, and competence towards integrating a work-lens into counseling practice. The current investigation seeks to examine graduate counseling student attitudes toward required career coursework through replication of an existing case study (Lara et al., 2011). A critical difference between the current study and the Lara et al. (2011) study concerns course format, with the former being taught in a blended format (with only three in-class meetings throughout the semester). Based on the recommendations for future research offered by Lara et al. (2011), the current replication study was also modified to boost the opportunity for peer interaction throughout the course through a constructivist framework in order to investigate the impact of peer attitudes on perceptions of career counseling.

Previous Research

Investigators performed a replication of the case study conducted by Lara et al. (2011) with modifications based on both course format and suggestions for future research. The original researchers sought to understand the nature of graduate counseling students' negative or indifferent attitudes toward career counseling by analyzing qualitative data collected from six students taking a career counseling course. Various factors influenced how students developed negative or indifferent attitudes toward career counseling, including experiences in the course, peer and instructor influences, and perceptions about the relevance of career counseling in areas of intended practice. Throughout the course, participants came to understand the value of career development by applying course concepts to their own lives, as well as to client cases, indicating that application-oriented and hands-on experience contributed to their enhanced understanding and more favorable attitudes toward career content (Lara et al., 2011). The importance of further research about the impact of peer interaction on student attitudes was emphasized by previous

investigators (Lara et al., 2011), which informed the modifications integrated into this replication study.

Replication studies are essential to confirm or refute existing empirical findings (Anderson & Maxwell, 2017; Brandt et al., 2014). Recent literature (Brandt et al., 2014) outlines five necessary ingredients for replication studies. First, researchers must define the effects and methods they wish to replicate (Brandt et al., 2014). In the current study, the authors sought to investigate graduate student attitudes toward a career counseling course through the same case study methodology (Lara et al., 2011).

Second and third, researchers must follow as closely as possible the methods of the original study and must make available the details about their replication available for evaluation and further replication. (Brandt et al., 2014). The current study served as a modified replication of a recent qualitative case study (Lara et al., 2011). As such, qualitative methodology was utilized to understand student perspectives and experiences. Several modifications were made to the initial study based on differences between the circumstances of each course. These modifications are outlined in the methods section that follows (data collection).

Fourth, replication studies must have high statistical power (Brandt et al., 2014). Given that both the initial and replicated studies were qualitative in methodology, statistical power does not apply. However, the attempts at validation of the initial findings will be discussed in detail. Finally, the replicated results must be evaluated and compared to the initial study (Brandt et al., 2014). These comparisons can be located in the results and discussion sections of the current manuscript and are intended to add to the trustworthiness of previous findings (Lara et al., 2011), building a credible body of knowledge on the phenomenon of graduate student attitudes toward career counseling coursework, regardless of course format (brick-and-mortar vs. online).

Credibility

In qualitative inquiry, it is imperative for investigators to intentionally boost credibility, or the truthful depiction of participants views (Polit & Beck, 2012). Attention to reflexivity is an important component of credibility (Cope, 2017). Reflexivity in qualitative investigations refers to the understanding that the product of research is reflective of the background and biases of the researcher (Gibbs, 2008). A self-critical focus is necessary to obtain legitimacy, as no researcher is value-free; it is futile to attempt to eliminate the effects of the researcher. Similarly, "a researcher's background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions" (Malterud, 2001, p. 483-484).

As such, it was important to note that the first author has expertise in career development research, along with ten years of experience in performing qualitative inquiry. The second author has expertise in wellness across some counseling-related realms, including the importance of occupational wellness, a factor in the *Indivisible Self Model* (Sweeney & Witmer, 1991; Whitmer & Sweeney, 1992). The third author was an advanced graduate student in counseling at the time this study was conducted. This student was developing a clinical specialization in college

counseling and often integrated both work and wellness into clinical practice within the university counseling center setting. The lead investigator provided training to the third author.

Purpose and Research Questions

The aim of the current study was to build upon the recommendations of a previous investigation (Lara et al., 2011) relative to the influence of peer interaction on the development of student attitudes toward career counseling. The purpose of the current study was to replicate and expand upon the findings of Lara et al. (2011) relative to graduate counseling student perceptions of career coursework, and to explore the impact of peer-interactive, constructivist-informed assignments on the interest, engagement, and perceptions of graduate students toward their required online career course. The following research questions guided the current study:
1. How do masters-level counseling students perceive their online career course?
2. How do their experiences during the online career course impact their perceptions?
3. How do interactive, constructivist assignments impact their experience in the online career course?

Method

Participants

A purposive sample of 24 graduate students in a CACREP-accredited counseling program participated in this project. The Department of Counseling where this project took place was located in a large Midwestern University. This department offered three concentrations: a) Clinical Mental Health (CMH); b) School Counseling (SC); and c) Student Affairs (SA). Data was gathered from students in all three concentrations: CMH ($n =12$); SC ($n =11$); and SA ($n =1$). This is a representative sample of the program, which is comprised most heavily of CMH students, followed closely by SC students, with a much smaller concentration of SA students. The career counseling course at this institution was offered exclusively in a blended format, with the vast majority of instruction taking place online (students are required to meet three times in-person). This career class is a graduation requirement for all students in the program, does not carry any prerequisite coursework, and does not serve as a prerequisite for other courses. As such, the 24 students who took part in this project ranged from being at the beginning of their respective programs of study (first semester) to being at the end of their respective programs of study (final semester). Of the 24 students in the course, one quarter ($n =6$) identified as male, while the remaining participants identified as female ($n =18$).

Procedures

During the 8-week summer section of the online career counseling course, the overall framework from Lara et al. (2011) was replicated to explore attitudes of counseling graduate students in their career course. Additionally, the impact of interactive, constructivist-based course assignments on these attitudes was explored, particularly given the primarily online format of the course. This course was offered exclusively in a blended format, comprised of three in-class meetings, with the remainder of the course instruction occurring asynchronously online. During the first-in-class meeting, students were provided with an overview of the course, followed by a

lecture on career theories. After the lecture, students engaged in a peer-interactive, a constructivist-based in-class assignment requiring the application of career theory to a current work-related popular news article. Pairs of students were allowed to select a career theory and news article of their choosing. The second-class meeting was devoted to another peer-interactive, constructivist-based course assignment: presentation of a detailed literature review on a self-selected work-related topic in the format of a mock conference poster. Students were required to submit their poster proposals to the annual state-level counseling conference, which occurred several months after the end of the course. Several pairs of students successfully presented at this conference. The third (final) in-class meeting was devoted to a comprehensive final exam (multiple choice and true/false format).

Given the substantial online component of this class, the course management system Blackboard was utilized, which specifically entailed the *Discussion Board* feature. Throughout the course, each student was designated to facilitate and moderate his or her asynchronous discussion board about an assigned chapter or article for one week. Students were provided with explicit expectations for the frequency and quality of their discussion board participation at the outset of the course to facilitate greater depth of reflection, which is consistent with recommendations from previous research (York, Yamagata-Lynch, & Smaldino, 2016). The framework for online discussion was informed by the life design paradigm of career counseling (Savickas, 2012), in which one's life story is constructed through examining the intersection of identity and work, creating a cohesive narrative across identity domains. The ongoing discussion board assignment was intentionally designed to facilitate peer interaction, as students responded to one another on each discussion board. This is an intentional methodological component, as previous researchers have found that online discussion boards are frequently sparse in student engagement with one another, with many students rarely reading the posts of other students, nor considering the ideas of others in their own contributions (Hara, Bonk, & Angeli, 2000; Larson & Keiper, 2002).

To enhance the constructivist focus, and as recommended by other scholars (see Scholl et al., 2017) each weekly discussion facilitator was allowed flexibility to focus on segment(s) of their assigned chapter or article of choosing, which often entailed direct exploration of links between personal experience and specific content from the reading (e.g., connecting an article about career transition to a memory of a parent being laid off). Other students were allowed to expand upon the discussion or integrate additional components of the assigned chapter/article, resulting in weekly co-construction and co-conceptualization of course material.

Data Collection

Participants provided written responses to the same oral interview questions implemented by Lara et al. (2011). These 12 questions were divided into two sets of 6 (instead of the three sets of 4 utilized in the Lara et al. (2011) study), given the accelerated nature of the course. As such, investigators for the current study collected data at two points (the middle and end of the course), whereas Lara et al. (2011) collected data at three points (beginning, middle, and after the end of the course). The rationale for this modification was that the course in the current study was abbreviated in length given that it was a summer course, making two data collection points more manageable. Data in the current study were collected through two small written reflections

submitted online: mid-semester (six questions) and end-of-semester attitude assessments (six questions). See Table 1 for a list of the reflective prompts offered at each point of data collection.

Although these two assessments were part of course experience, students had the option of excluding their responses from the analysis. No students opted out, resulting in an overall sample of *N* =24. Rationale for obtaining written responses instead of utilizing interviews for data collection, as did Lara et al. (2011) was three-fold: a) the number of participants in this project was four times the number in the Lara et al. (2011) study, allowing for the feasibility of thorough data collection; b) the time frame for data collection in the current project was much shorter than in the Lara et al. (2011) study, again allowing for feasibility of thorough data collection; and, c) given the primarily online format of this course, students had the opportunity to become familiar with using the Blackboard Discussion Board feature prior to data collection, allowing for ease of use.

Table 1	
Reflective Prompts	
Mid Semester	1. Discuss how **relevant** your career counseling course is to your reasons for becoming a counselor and your plans for using your counseling degree. 2. How does your training in the career counseling course **fit** with the rest of your counselor training? 3. What are your **reactions** to the concepts being covered in your career counseling course? 4. Describe your **reactions** to your experiences in the career counseling course. 5. What are your perceptions regarding how career counseling **fits** within the field of counseling? 6. What is training experience necessary to gain comfort and **competence** in the delivery of career counseling?
End-of Semester	7. How did your program **faculty** demonstrate the value they place on the career counseling course? 8. Describe your personal reactions to your **faculty's** and peers' attitudes regarding career counseling. 9. How did your reactions influence the **effort** you put into the career counseling course? 10. Given your **efforts**, what do you think your outcomes were in terms of your **competency** as a counselor? 11. Describe your comfort and **competency** in performing career counseling as developed through your career counseling course. 12. How did your experience in the career counseling course, given the effort you put forth, contribute to your development as a counselor-in-training?

Data Analysis

Written reflections obtained from students were uploaded verbatim into NVivo 11 Software (QSR International, 2015). Data were analyzed by the first and third authors. The first and third authors used the process of horizontalization and identifying clusters of meaning

(Moustakas, 1994). This process consisted of identifying important quotes to understand the students' experiences and developing groups of related statements to identify overall themes. The investigators sought to determine the alignment of currently emerging themes with the properties (themes) offered in the findings of the initial study (Lara et al., 2011). The first and third authors independently open coded the responses of two randomly selected participants to create a list of codes using a deductive process where the properties offered by Lara et al. (2011) was used as a conceptual framework which guided initial theme development. Upon investigator consensus, a codebook was developed (Miles & Huberman, 1994) including operational definitions of each code informed by the emerging themes. This initial codebook was utilized to independently code responses for two additional participants, resulting in adjustments to the initial codebook. Upon resolution of remaining code discrepancies, the first and third authors independently analyzed responses for the remaining participants ($N = 20$). Final codes were organized into superordinate and sub-themes, which were directly compared to the properties (themes) offered by Lara et al. (2011).

Results

To reiterate, the objective of this modified replication study was to extend the credibility of the findings offered by Lara et al. (2011) relative to the impact of an interactionist and constructivist course design on student attitudes about an online graduate career counseling course. Results are organized relative to the research questions: a) how do masters-level counseling students perceive their online career course; b) how do their experiences during the online career course impact their perceptions; and, c) how do interactive, constructivist assignments impact their experience in the online career course? Additionally, themes from the Lara et al. (2011) study are connected to the three themes that emerged from the data in the current study: a) perception, b) relevance and c) competence. Each theme is supported by direct quotes from participants.

Superordinate Theme 1: Perception

Results for this theme related to the second and third research questions (i.e., how students' experiences during the online career course impact their perceptions? and how do interactive, constructivist assignments impact students' experiences in the online career course?). Overwhelmingly, participants expressed entering the course with misperceptions and/or negative attitudes about the course, gaining an increased understanding and appreciation of the role of career/work in counseling through the course (specifically through observations/interactions with their instructor, their peers, and course assignments), and developing positive reactions toward career counseling as a result. Data associated with this theme were organized as follows: a) erroneous initial perceptions b) perceptual changes as a result of the course; c) impact of peer attitudes on perception; d) impact of instructor attitude/approach on perception; and e) impact, of course, assignments on perception.

Subtheme 1: erroneous initial perception of career course. This sub-theme directly related to the first research question (i.e., how masters-level counseling students perceive their online career course?) and is aligned with the *familiarity* theme offered by Lara et al. (2011), defined as "participants' initial frame of reference regarding career counseling" (p. 433). Over 20% of participants (20.83%; $n = 5$) reported that they thought the course was going to focus on how to

manage their careers as counselors. One SC student emphasized a complete lack of awareness of career counseling as an area of study:

> I thought the course was about our careers as counselors; I didn't even know that there was an entire field dedicated to individuals who needed assistance with their career choices.

Similarly, one CMH student indicated the utility of a course that focused specifically on career development for counselors:

> This course is not what I had anticipated. Before reading the description, I thought that this would be a course about how to establish your OWN career in the counseling field. I still think this would be a great idea…since the majority of the people in the program want to go into private practice eventually.

Subtheme 2: perceptual changes as a result of career course. This sub-theme directly relates to the second research question and aligned with the *expansion* theme offered by Lara et al. (2011), defined as "participants' descriptions of broadening of their understanding of career counseling" (p. 435). The overwhelming majority of students (83.33%; $n = 20$) indicated that they gained an increased awareness of and appreciation for career work as a result of the course. One SC student emphasized an elevated understanding of the importance of a work-focus in counseling:

> As a result of the class, I think I understand a lot more about career in the field as a whole…I did not realize it was even part of what a counselor does…

Another CMH student discussed how taking the career course increased his awareness of the fit of career counseling in a counselor's scope of practice:

> I believe that I have taken a lot from this course and it has helped me to understand the role we, as counselors, play in helping clients work through career-related struggles. For me, this has changed my perception on counseling as a whole. I now see that we have the ability to help clients in every aspect of their lives.

Subtheme 3: impact of peer attitudes on perception. This sub-theme directly relates to the second research question and aligned with the *program* theme offered by Lara et al. (2011), which "…encompassed data describing observations of other students' comments about career counseling and how career counseling was situated within the curriculum" (p. 433). One CMH student indicated that interest in career counseling exhibited by her classmates contributed to her engagement in the course:

> I was able to learn new things about career counseling even from my peers in class. It was encouraging to meet and be around people who were enthusiastic about the topic.

Another CMH student emphasized the collective shift in student attitudes as it progressed:

> As to my peers' attitudes, I sensed a palpable lack of enthusiasm going into the class, but I have also felt the excitement increase substantially as it progressed… my reaction to these

attitudes was to unconsciously adopt a similar one; I have seen my enthusiasm for the subject grow as we have learned more about the topic together…

Subtheme 4: impact of instructor attitude/approach on perception. This sub-theme directly relates to the second research question and aligned with the *faculty* theme offered by Lara et al. (2011), which reflected "participants' perceptions of faculty attitudes regarding career counseling" (Lara et al., 2011, p. 433). Seventy-five percent of participants (*n* =18) indicated that the attitude/approach of their instructor positively contributed to their interest and engagement in the course. One SC student discussed how the enthusiasm of the career counseling instructor was contagious:

> It was very evident that (*instructor*) placed a great deal of value on career. I have taken other classes from (*instructor*), and she has stressed her interest in this area in those classes as well. Her enthusiasm for career helped me become more excited for this area.

Similarly, another CMH student emphasized that the approach of the career course instructor was all the more important given the hybrid nature of the course:

> Since this was a mostly online class, I noticed the value that (*instructor*) placed on career by how interactive she was in the discussion boards. In most of the online classes I have taken, the professor has contributed minimally (if at all) to the discussion, but (*instructor*) seemed to have a relevant article and great counterpoints for almost every discussion thread, as well as shorter responses sprinkled throughout them. Her enthusiasm for the topic was also apparent in our in-class meetings.

Subtheme 5: impact of course assignments on perception. This sub-theme directly related to the third research question and aligned most prominently with the *engagement* theme offered by Lara et al. (2011), defined as "strategies that facilitate learning" (p. 434). Additionally, the theme of *support/feedback* is applicable, defined as "encouragement for engaging in their learning process" (p. 436). Outside of the final exam, there were four major assignments, two of which emerged as particularly impactful on the positive reactions to the course developed by the participants. First, half of the participants (50%; *n* =12) indicated that the weekly, interactive, online discussion boards contributed to their positive reactions, largely due to the co-construction of knowledge. As stated by one CMH student:

> I enjoy the discussion boards because they give us an opportunity to process our understanding of the material with one another and learn from each other at the same time. I am surprised at the quality of discussion topics my classmates are coming up with, and the different ways people connect with these topics. It is helping me learn and understand the material much more than if I were to just read the chapters and articles and summarize at my own discretion.

Also, almost 60% of participants (58.33%; *n* =14) emphasized the impact of the mock conference poster assignment, which several students later presented at an actual state counseling conference. Using an interactive and constructivist framework, pairs of students conducted literature reviews on work-related topics of their interest, which they organized into an electronic conference poster and presented to their peers:

> We put in a lot of effort to complete our conference poster assignment, which stemmed from a topic both my partner and I were passionate about. It will be interesting to present this topic at the conference – another activity that was surprisingly fun to prep for in class.

Superordinate Theme 2: Relevance

Results for this theme related to the second research question. The perception of relevance seemed to be enhanced through a strong participant tendency to apply course content to either their personal or professional lives. Furthermore, participants tended to view career counseling as relevant to their reasons for becoming a counselor, regardless of their particular concentration within the program. Data associated with this theme were divided into: a) personal relevance, and b) professional relevance.

Subtheme 1: personal relevance. The constructivist-informed course assignments allowed for connection between interest/experience and course content. As a result, many students indicated that they were able to connect differential pieces of the course to their own experiences, serving to enhance both their interest and their engagement. This sub-theme aligned most prominently with the *resonance* theme offered by Lara et al. (2011), "defined by participants' descriptions of the career counseling course as engaging and interesting" (p. 435). The supporting quotes offered by Lara et al. (2011) for this theme related to both relevance and applicability of course content. This closely mirrored the findings in the current project, as over 54% of participants (54.17%; $n = 13$) made statements illustrative of linking course content to their own lives. One CMH student explained how he connected with theory through observing the experiences of his aging parents:

> The concept of the developmental theories captures my attention. I am especially interested in the second half of the developmental stages. My parents are older and have retired. Some of their friends have too. I am interested in looking at retirement during the course.

Similarly, another CMH student indicated that taking the career course led her to engage in deeper reflection about her career path:

> I enjoy the discussions in this course, as they pertain to real life, and I can connect to that and learn better that way. A few conversations have helped me to think deeper about my own career path and the "mistake" jobs I had in the past, which turned out to be the right path for me even though I didn't see it at the time. It all led me to where I am and helped me to learn everything I know now and am able to bring to my current jobs.

Subtheme 2: professional relevance. Initial perceptions of career work as separate from the general field of counseling seemed to quickly transform into perceptions of integration between personal and career issues in practice. This sub-theme was most parallel with the theme of *alignment*, defined as "…participants' understanding of the overlapping domain of issues addressed by both personal and career counseling" (Lara et al., 2011, p. 434). Nearly 88% of participants (87.5%; $n = 21$) emphasized that they grew to understand the connection between personal and work-related issues. One CMH student reported:

> I may not intend to enter the profession as a career counselor, but it comes up often as a source of stress, frustration, and change. Almost everybody works or will work so I will be using this course a lot, even if I don't go looking for it.

The lone SA student appropriately addressed the utility of a holistic approach in working with the college population:

> Most college students really struggle with "what they want to be when they grow up" so having this class is a great resource. This is a piece that is needed to help assist the student as a whole person.

One SC student discussed her realization that work-related struggles can negatively impact other areas of life:

> The holistic approach was the first concept that really jumped out to me. The idea of dealing with all parts of a person's life when they are going through a change in career makes sense to me. If someone is struggling with a career, they may be having issues in other parts of their lives as well. This approach appears to help in all areas of a person's life and not just the work issues.

Superordinate Theme 3: Competence

Results for this theme relate most closely to the third research question. Overwhelmingly, students expressed competence in understanding the overlap of work and personal concerns. However, they emphasized the need for applied experience in providing work-conscious counseling in order to feel competent. Additionally, many students expressed a desire for practice administering and interpreting career assessments. Data associated with this theme were organized into: a) competence gained, and b) competence still lacking.

Subtheme 1: competence gained. This sub-theme aligned most prominently with the *grasping* theme offered by Lara et al. (2011), defined as "mastering course concepts and their application" (p. 435). However, for the current sample, the "application" component of the grasping theme was not as prominent. Nearly 88% of participants ($n =21$) stated that they gained professional competence through completing the career course. One SC student discussed how her increased understanding of the value of career counseling for students will contribute to her competence in implementing course content in the K-12 setting:

> I am competent to articulate to students the importance of career issues, and how it supports self-awareness, options/resources and reflection of factors that would help or hinder their career path. I recognize the unintended positive consequence of work (like providing structure to your day), and I am motivated to bring that knowledge to students.

One CMH student expressed that the breadth of content covered in the course contributed to her competence in integrating a work-lens into her practice:

I do feel more prepared in my understanding of career issues relating to groups such as LGBT, minorities, and the elderly. Topics I hadn't thought about, such as working with a gay male on coming out at work, can have serious implications and should be addressed cautiously. That is just one example, but I have learned general concepts will benefit me as a counselor in the long run.

Subtheme 2: competence still lacking. The overarching themes from Lara et al. (2011) that aligned most prominently with this sub-theme are 1) *development,* which relates to student confidence, and 2) *training*, defined as "participants' perceptions that they needed additional career training" (p. 436). Nearly 67% of participants *(*66.67%; *n* =16) expressed that, as much as their competence grew through taking the course, it was not adequate to actually practice from a work-conscious framework. Typically, reflections on lagging competence related to either the need for applied experience, specifically with career assessment.

The *experience* theme offered by Lara et al. (2011), is defined as "participants' perceived needs for practical experience performing career counseling" (p. 435), and closely mirrors participants' stated desire for applied practice. Nearly 67% of participants (66.67%; *n* =16) reported that they would need hands-on experience providing work-related counseling in order to feel more competent, which is much more difficult to implement in online instruction. One CMH student discussed the potential utility of role-plays or supervised practice in career counseling for boosting competence:

I am a person who learns better from actually doing what I am being taught. I like to get educated on a concept and then actually do it so I can demonstrate my understanding of the concept and figure out what I need to do to improve. Thus, it is necessary for me to either role-play or provide career counseling in a real-world scenario under supervised guidance.

The *expectations* theme offered by Lara et al. (2011) is defined as "students' perceived learning needs" (p. 434) and parallels participants' stated desire for experience with career assessment in particular. Over 70% of students (70.83%; *n* =17) specifically noted the need for more exposure to career assessments in order to feel competent. One CMH student expressed his hope that he would be able to learn more about career assessments in his upcoming assessment course:

I would say the biggest amount of training that I need currently to gain that comfort and competence is in the assessment process of career counseling. I have not taken the assessment course yet, so I am uncomfortable with all of the assessments and how to administer and interpret them. Once I have a better understanding of assessments like the Myers Briggs or Holland inventory, I will feel much more comfortable with the delivery of career counseling.

Discussion

The purpose of this investigation was to replicate and expand upon the findings of Lara et al. (2011) relative to graduate counseling student perceptions of career coursework, and to explore the impact of peer-interactive, constructivist-informed assignments on the interest and engagement of graduate students relative to their online career counseling course.

Findings from the current investigation seem to validate the results offered by Lara et al. (2011) concerning the pervasive misperceptions held by counseling graduate students relative to the intertwined nature of personal and work issues. Indeed, the first (of only three) in-class meetings was largely devoted to explaining the intersection of personal and work concerns in order to provide a more meaningful framework for the course. Also consistent with the findings of Lara et al. (2011), this attitude also seemed to be pervasive among program faculty, as it quickly became clear that the importance of work/career was not being referenced in any coursework within the counseling curriculum, per student report.

Results of the current study supported the finding offered by Lara et al. (2011) relative to student perceptions. Specifically, the initially neutral or negative perceptions of career counseling expressed by students across all program concentrations transformed into perceptions of understanding and appreciation of the intersection of work and personal issues, as well as the fit of work/career within the profession as a whole.

Peer-interactive, constructivist-based course design emerged as a likely facilitator of student interest and engagement among participants in the current sample, particularly in light of the blended format of the course. This lends support to previous researchers who found no significant differences in student sense of community regardless of course format (Murdock and Williams, 2011). It should be noted that this finding merits further research, as a control group was not utilized in the current study. This finding is consistent with current recommendations highlighted in the literature (Emmett & McAuliffe, 2011; McAuliffe, 2011; Savickas, 2005; Taylor et al., 2017). As a collective group, participants seemed to grasp the idea that a rich understanding of a given topic can be shaped through reflection on individual experience and meaning-making (Emmett & McAuliffe, 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). In a parallel process, the participants in the current study engaged in their reality-creation and meaning-making through consistent interaction and collaboration with members of their peer group for virtually every component of this course. This course design was intended to expand upon the recommendations of Lara et al. (2011) relative to the use of peer interaction to boost course engagement.

Recommendations for Counselor Educators

Lara et al. (2011) stated: "When the goal of counselor training programs is to establish career counseling as a significant aspect of the profession, curriculum structure, faculty attitudes, and peer interaction appear to be contextual factors that merit careful faculty attention" (p. 437). The following recommendations are intended to build on the suggestions for future research offered by Lara et al. (2011) and to provide counselor educators with specific suggestions for improving student interest and engagement in developing a work-lens in their counseling practice. While this study was restricted to graduate students in a specific counseling program, it seems likely that the following considerations could be utilized by other counseling and related programs, specifically those with blended coursework offerings in their curriculum.

Curriculum structure

A prominent reflection from participants on their perceived competence concerned the necessity of directly applying course content. The benefits of applied learning experiences

permeate the current literature in counselor education (Fulton & Gonzalez, 2015; Savickas, 2005). Two components of the course under investigation posed challenges to creating an applied approach to the content: a) the blended course format with only three in-class meetings, and b) the abbreviated duration of the course due to the summer session. Given the technological shift in educational settings and increased frequency of online courses in counseling programs, it is vital that educators continue to enhance their courses and meet student needs. It is recommended that frequent opportunities for engaging in applied practice of course content be provided (Fulton & Gonzalez, 2015; Savickas, 2005). Intentional, ongoing instructor feedback can be useful in boosting student engagement (Scholl et al., Further, even though many counseling graduate students will not experience formalized field experience in a career services setting, they should be instilled with a sense of professional responsibility in approaching their practice from a work-conscious perspective, given the intertwined nature of career and holistic wellness.

As such, it is recommended that career faculty emphasize the importance/impact of asking work-related questions at intake, focusing on the intersection between work and other components of client identity, which is consistent with the life design paradigm (Savickas, 2012) honoring the interplay between personal and work concerns. It is also imperative that counselor educators provide a consistent opportunity for role-playing portions of counseling sessions focused on a wide variety work-related issues with differential populations (e.g., indecision about college major; re-entry into the workforce after being released from prison; work transitions/retirement). This can be a challenging objective for courses offered in a primarily or exclusively online format yet offers an opportunity for educators to be creative in their course delivery by finding ways to engage students via an online platform. Finally, counselor educators would do well to provide opportunities for role-playing the administration, scoring, and interpretation of various career assessments. Again, non-traditional methods for role-plays in an online setting are necessary, as face-to-face interaction may not be available. The pervasiveness of mentioning career assessments in responses to prompts was unexpected, as students were not specifically asked about assessment, nor was it a major focus of the course. However, recommendations for active learning are consistent with recent investigations on this topic (see Fulton & Gonzalez, 2015). Given the pervasive perception of lack of applied competence that emerged from the current sample, faculty teaching career coursework should be prepared to provide students with clear and consistent feedback about their skills, as well as specific steps to improve.

In the instance of online or blended career course offerings, it may be imperative for instructors to emphasize that it is critical for students to take ownership over their learning process and experience, and to intentionally extend their application of course content beyond the classroom (York et al., 2016). Students in this study were provided with clear guidelines for graduate-level discussion forums at the outset of the class and were encouraged to connect course content to both personal and professional examples in their own lives. Students often responded to one another's examples, acknowledging a deepened understanding of various aspects of course content through the sharing of personal experiences (e.g., feeling discriminated against in the workplace for being openly gay; watching one's parents struggle with daily meaning and purpose during retirement, etc.).

Faculty attitudes

It is important to recognize that the students enrolled in this career course had been enrolled in their respective programs of study for various amounts of time (as there were no pre-requisites for the course). However, participants repeatedly indicated that work-related content had not been mentioned in their other courses, resulting in students entering the career course without an existing professional framework (Heppner, O'Brien, Hinkelman, & Flores, 1996; Tinsley, 2001). Just as content from other courses might be referenced in the career course (e.g., discussing the relevance of career counseling to couples and family counseling relative to the impact of job loss on a relationship), it would be beneficial from a life design perspective (Savickas, 2012) to work closely with instructors of other courses regarding intentional strategies for integrating work-content when appropriate or relevant (Betz & Corning, 1994; Krumboltz, 1993; Manuele-Adkins, 1992). This recommendation is consistent with the discussion offered by Lara et al. (2011): "…faculty may consider incorporating examples of career issues across the curriculum in courses such as counseling skills, group, multicultural counseling, ethics, human development, testing and assessment, and consultation" (p. 438). This recommendation may be of particular importance for courses offered in an online format, which often provides reduced opportunity for organic discussions between students and instructors. Through conveying interest in the quality of the student learning experience (e.g., maintaining consistent virtual availability for responding to student questions, welcoming feedback about the course, etc.), online course instructors may improve the quality of their relationships with students, even in the face of reduced or eliminated face-to-face interaction (Scholl et al., 2017).

Peer interaction

For students in the current case study, the peer group within the course served as a strong social reference. A social contagion effect seemed to emerge, and as some students in the class began to actively engage in course content (typically through application of content to personal/professional experiences/goals), other students seemed to follow along quickly. This may be an important finding in light of the blended course format, as it supports previous research indicating that student participation in online coursework may be more strongly motivated by student motivation and goals rather than course format (Nistor, 2013). The importance of the dynamics of peer interaction in the classroom (or in this case, in the virtual sphere) has been noted in recent literature (Emmett & McAuliffe, 2011; Lara et al., 2011). Instructors can facilitate students in absorbing each other's enthusiasm for course content by providing plentiful opportunities for peer engagement throughout the course, which is consistent with current recommendations (Emmett & McAuliffe, 2011; Lara et al., 2011). From a constructivist perspective, it is recommended that instructors present course content seminar-style when possible, avoiding a lecture format (Emmett & McAuliffe, 2011). The rationale is that for the co-construction of knowledge to occur, students must be permitted to take the lead throughout the course, outwardly processing their understanding of content in the context of their unique life experiences (Emmett & McAuliffe, 2011; Taylor et al., 2017).

Although the career course in the current study was offered in a primarily online format, this seminar-style of instruction was mirrored through use of the online discussion board feature. Additionally, students are encouraged to utilize their actual personal/career histories/concerns

when engaging in role-plays of career intakes, sessions, and assessments. This incorporation of the life design framework (Savickas, 2012) allows for the optimal integration of personal and work-related concerns in the context of an individual's multifaceted identity. (Emmett & McAuliffe, 2011; Taylor et al., 2017).

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Several limitations must be noted in the current investigation. Generalizability may be a factor given the idiosyncratic components of the particular course from which data was collected (e.g., blended format; abbreviated duration due to summer session). The impact of this limitation seems to have been minimal, as results that emerged from data analysis mirrored those found in previous studies (Lara et al., 2011) without these unique course features. Given nationwide initiatives to expand online course offerings (Babson Study, 2016), future researchers would do well to focus investigations about student engagement in counseling coursework on hybrid or exclusively distance education formats specifically. Integrating peer interaction into online coursework can be challenging, and counselor educators would benefit from further recommendations in this area. Another noteworthy limitation may be that participants in the current study varied considerably in their levels of academic and professional development, ranging from students in their first semester in the program to students in their final semester in the program. Future researchers may benefit from analyzing data collected from students in developmental clusters (e.g., beginning, middle, and end of their programs). Given the developmental nature of professional growth, an additional area for future research may include investigations with early career counselors to assess differences in perspective relative to the utility of integrating a work-lens into their practice as more seasoned professionals.

Conclusion

Most graduate students in counseling initially seem to enroll in career coursework exclusively to fill a graduation requirement. However, the majority of students quickly grasp not only the various ways course content applies to them directly (personally and professionally), but also the significance of issues related to work and career within the counseling profession as a whole. Perhaps as this generation of counselors-in-training become practitioners, they will initiate a trickle-down effect, striving to incorporate a working lens into their practice.

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