

# Variations among Students' Experiences of Learning to Counsel — a Q Method Analysis

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## Abstract

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We explored students' experiences of learning in a part-time, two-year counseling course (60 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System [ECTS] credits). We wanted to know if there were any systematic variations among individual experiences — if so, what kinds of patterns characterized the variations and how to understand the patterns. We applied the Q method, in which 22 out of 23 participants shared their experiences. Our key findings emerged in three factors. We interpreted and named them F1: building effective counseling relationships is fundamental, F2: the entirety of the course, and F3: self-development. We discuss the factors from theory of counselors' professional development. The knowledge may support students and teachers in their awareness of what is the important aspects of counselor development. From a subject-didactic perspective, the study informs readers on how to implement a curriculum for a part-time counseling course.

**Keywords:** Professional development; didactic; counseling course; counselor training; counseling course curriculum

## Introduction

A challenge for teachers and supervisors is to support students in their individual needs. How to take on the challenge may be guided by an understanding of how variations in experiences of learning counseling express levels of professional development. The students in the study experienced the same or similar activities and frames of learning during a course in counseling. They differed in the aspects of the activities that they were occupied with, related to, and discussed.

## The Purpose and Aim of the Study

The purpose of the study was to gain knowledge of how the students developed their professional competence in the learning activities of the course. The aim was to explore if there were patterns in the variations of what students experienced as valuable for their learning given their personal history, attitudes, knowledge, and the themes that they want to explore and understand. To obtain the necessary

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information we paid attention to how frames of learning, activities, and relationships with teachers, student peers, and people participating in their practices influenced the students' learning.

## The Course

The context of the study was a counseling course (60 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System [ECTS] credits). The part-time, two-year course belonged to Level 7 in the European qualifications framework. A requirement for admission was a minimum of two years of professional practice after a bachelor's degree or a similar education.

The course had a learning culture where students were perceived as individuals who learned by creating and interpret meanings from practical experience. A core learning process involved systematic reflections on experiences with counseling in professional practice where diverse theoretical perspectives supported the reflections. The students also engaged in critical reflections on theoretical knowledge. Their reflections were critical in the sense that theories were scrutinized for their underlying norms, values, and ethical consequences. The students communicated their reflections in individual assignments and conversations with peers.

The main outcomes for the students were to manage, structure, and support their clients' learning via counseling. By learning, the clients would develop self-insights and skills to improve their competencies to act and collaborate with others according to their best will.

The main learning activities were lectures and workshops, exercises, counseling practice, group supervision, and writing a logbook. The curriculum outlined a progression where the students advanced from attention to the self to the relationship between the self and the other and then, to the context of the relationship. Learning professional competence was viewed as a lifelong process that promoted the development of persons, groups, and organizations. Attitude, knowledge, and skills in performance were understood as integrated with the culture and constructed by the individual.

## The Research Questions

This article discusses the research questions: 1) Do the subjective experiences of learning to counsel vary systematically among the students in the course? If so, what features characterizes the systematic variations? 2) How can we understand variation in students' experiences of learning in the counseling course from the perspective of the theory of professional development?

The questions presuppose learning of counseling as involving interactions among processes that consist of the counselor's recognition of the client (Aubert & Bakke, 2018; Falender & Shafranske, 2014; Honneth, 1995, 2012; Schibbye, 2009), the client's trust in the counselor (Bogo, Globerman, & Sussman, 2004; Emilsson & Johnsson, 2007; Frowe, 2005; Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998; Mansbridge, 1999; McAllister, 1995), conversations supporting learning and development (Bernard & Goodyear, 2013; Hawkins, 2006; Stoltenberg & McNeill, 2010), and the counselor's perspectives on reflection and self-reflection (Bengtsson, 2003; Mead, 1934; Wallace & Cooper, 2015). We may perceive the interactions as having qualities that express various levels of professional development.

## Theory of Professional Development

Rønnestad and Skovholt (2012, p. 163) define professional development by giving attention to "subjective experience of growth in therapeutic competence", "an integration of the therapist's personal traits and individual style with the theoretical and procedural aspects of the work", and "being energized and vitalized in and by one's professional work". Descriptions of professional development cover different timescales. In a first timescale we find phases in a lifelong career as counsellor. An example is Rønnestad and Skovholt's (2012) model of practitioners' development and stagnation where they differ among the phases the novice student, the advanced student, the novice professional, the experienced professional and the senior professional. A second timescale cover the professionals' development in learning trajectories that cycle between phases. An example is students who are proficient in counseling individual

clients and at the same time are novices in counseling groups (Stoltenberg & McNeill, 2010). A third timescale is a reference for professional development within a phase. An example is how students pay conscious attention to objects of learning in each phase (Reynolds, 1942; Stoltenberg & McNeill, 2010). The relevant timescale for our research, cover the novice and advanced student. They are trainees who are learning to become counselors. We searched the literature for knowledge of counselor development in the actual timescales.

Stoltenberg and McNeill (2010) elaborate the concept of professional development when they argue for an integrated developmental model (IDM) for supervision of counselors and therapists. They make a construct of Levels 1–3 (trainee levels), with Level 3i as the fourth integrative level (the integrated counselor/therapist). Each level has a structure that characterizes the trainee in the dimensions of self-awareness and other-awareness, motivation, and autonomy. We find similar phases of progression among trainees in other theories of professional development. Rønnestad and Skovholt (2012, pp. 55–56) describe development tasks for novice students to learn conceptual knowledge, to learn sufficient procedural knowledge to use one method, skill or approach, to control own mental and emotional states, to be open to information and not “closing off” conversations too early. These developmental tasks continue into the advanced student phase. There two tasks are added where the trainees modify images of counseling to be more realistic and learn to “manage bewilderment caused by complexity” (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2012, p. 71). Reynolds (1942, p. 71) describe professional development from a perspective of “conscious attention in learning to practice”. Three of the stages in her model is similar to the novice and the advanced student. The novice students are preoccupied with themselves and insensitive of the relationship to people and their surroundings (Reynolds, 1942, p. 76). They have a vague understanding of what people wants. The trainees give attention to something in the situation they can follow up. They struggle with what the situation demands from moment to moment. The advanced students have left behind the preoccupation by self and feel free to “study the situation as it is” (Reynolds, 1942, p. 79). They understand what the situation demands but often lack the adequate skills. When they experience their actions as inadequate, they appreciate the feedback and use it to learn and improve their actions. In a further development the advanced student feels safe to deal with novel experiences in counseling and adapt to new challenges (Reynolds, 1942, p. 81). When comparing the models of professional development on the trainee levels, we find that Stoltenberg and McNeill's (2010) model has more differentiated categories than the other models. In the following we describe the essence of their model.

In the IDM (Stoltenberg & McNeill, 2010) a trainee occupies a level compared on eight domains: intervention skills, assessment techniques, interpersonal assessment, client conceptualization, individual differences among clients, theoretical orientation, treatment plans and goals, and professional ethics. In the model's structure, a trainee may be on Level 1 in one domain and on Level 2 or 3 in another. The model also distinguishes among modalities as work with individuals, groups, couples, and families. A counselor/therapist at Level 3 when working with individuals may be on Level 1 when working with families. The IDM offers a differentiated and complex matrix for analyzing and understanding developmental levels among trainees.

To summarize, we have knowledge of levels in professional development of students in counseling courses. However, there is a gap in our knowledge of how students' experience of learning in a course are reflected by their level of professional development.

## **Method**

We found the Q method (Brown, 1997) useful for our purpose, since the method is constructed to uncover patterns in the variations in the subjective experiences of an object among people. The patterns of variation emerge by doing a factor analysis that compute correlations among peoples' agreement/disagreement of utterances that characterize the object of study. Phenomenology and Grounded theory (Creswell, 2012) were considered for gathering and analyzing experiences. However,

these methods do not have the same potential to discover patterns in variation of subjective experiences among many people as Q method.

## **Participants**

The participants were students who completed the course; 22 out of 23 accepted our invitation and signed a consent to contribute to the research and to be anonymous in the database and publication of the research. The participants comprised 20 women and two men. All of them were professionals with 2–25 years of work experience in the healthcare, social welfare, or educational sector. Their ages ranged from 30 to 55 years.

## **The Q Set**

The Q set is a sample of statements constructed by the researchers (Watts & Stenner, 2012) by listening to how the students expressed their experiences and ideas about counseling in their conversations in class and in written reflections. The conversations comprised diverse expressions of the thoughts and the ideas that the students paid attention to during the second year of the course. The teacher, who also was one of the researchers, summarized and reflected on the conversations in a journal written after each day of teaching the course. The students submitted four written reflections (2–3 pages each) on their experiences about the topics covered during the course. The conversations and the texts form the concourse in the Q method.

The researcher (who also taught the course) chose 120 utterances from the texts that expressed the variations in the topics covered in the course. Independent of each other, the researchers reduced the collection to 36 statements. Together, they dovetailed the collection and revised the sample for representativity, simplicity, and anonymity. The criteria used for the reduction were systemic and semantic. From the systemic perspective, attention was paid to the students' experiences with activities that challenged their attitudes, beliefs, and skills in relation to the self, others, activities, contexts, and ideas. From the semantic perspective, the choice of utterances represented the topics that had received considerable attention in the conversations among the students. Some examples of the topics are the use of metaphors in counseling, resistance from the other, recognition of social relationships, self-confidence, trust, the value of theoretical knowledge, and awareness of methods. The 36 statements reflected the variety in the students' perspectives on their learning of counseling.

## **The Q-Sort**

Each participant received a deck of cards with one statement on each card. The statements were randomly numbered between 1 and 36. One researcher guided the participants to sort the statements in agreement with how they valued the statements in comparison to each other. This task was done by placing one statement in each cell in the table for Q-sorting (see Figure 1).

The guided procedure ordered the sorting of weighted statements relative to each other. One cell has the value of +5, and two cells have the value of +4. There is a successive increase in the number of cells, starting from one cell (value of +5 or -5) up to six cells (value of 0). The procedure results in one statement in each cell. Based on this distribution, we computed the correlations among the weighted statements. We asked the participants to provide a written comment if they had experiences from the learning of counseling that were not reflected in the statements. None of the students made such a comment.

Ten months after the participants performed the Q-sort, the researchers invited three of them to discuss the interpretations of the results. These three participants' Q-sort results were similar in each of the three factors. The researchers met them individually and discussed their interpretations of the factors. The purpose was to confirm or disprove and elaborate on the researchers' interpretations. A consequence of the conversations was an enriched understanding of the factors in detail and scope (see the Interpretation of the factors section).

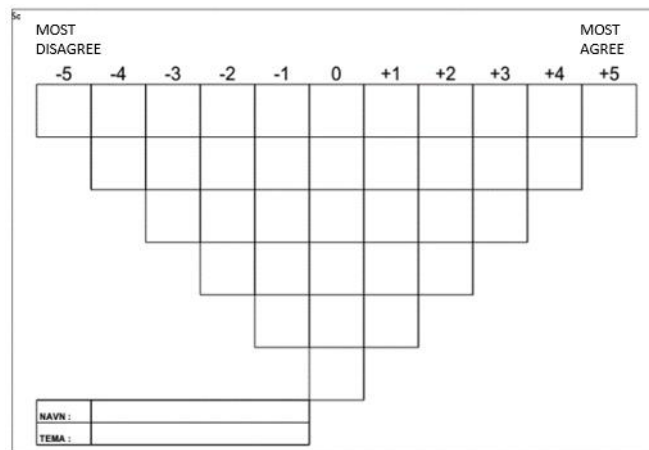


Figure 1. Matrix for Q-sorting.

### Statistical Analysis

#### From Q Sorts to Factors

The 22 Q-sorts were correlated and factor analyzed by using the program PQMethod 2.11 for Windows (Schmolck, 2002). The procedure consisting of a centroid factor analysis and a varimax rotation disclosed three factors. The correlations among the Q-sorts were computed by performing the centroid factor analysis. In this procedure, the correlated Q-sorts were gathered into groups according to their similarities. The correlations among the Q-sorts were explored from different perspectives by the varimax rotation. The purpose was to clarify the characteristic similarities and differences among the groups of Q-sorts. The exploration was done by strengthening high correlations and weakening low correlations. This process made it possible to decide on how the Q-sorts contributed to each factor.

Table 1. Rotated factor matrix.

QSORT	1	2	3
1	0.1361	0.5607X	0.3835
2	0.1743	0.1220	0.3092
3	0.3110	0.6047X	0.3784
4	0.6791X	0.1316	0.3970
5	0.5988X	0.1600	-0.1455
6	0.6835X	0.1894	0.4252
7	0.1543	0.0835	0.3125
8	0.4272X	0.2452	0.2041
9	0.1685	-0.0182	0.5080X
10	0.0381	0.8162X	0.1915
11	0.5475X	0.2351	0.1321
12	0.1991	0.2269	0.4778X
13	0.4846X	0.1751	0.3120
14	0.5228X	0.0413	-0.0230
15	-0.1706	-0.1577	0.4841X
16	-0.0234	0.2896	0.7492X
17	0.0845	0.5374X	-0.1861
18	0.2310	0.5540X	0.0309
19	0.1813	0.5306X	0.0518
20	0.2878	0.1303	0.7845X
21	0.2923	-0.0499	0.0891
22	-0.1143	0.5803X	0.3409

We found that 19 of the 22 Q-sorts charged significantly on three factors. They all had eigenvalues greater than 1.0. The eigenvalues are the sum of the squares of the correlation values of the statements that charge on each factor. When the eigenvalue is greater than 1.0, more than one Q-sort charge significantly on the factor.

The eigenvalues of the factors were 2.2773, 2.5602, and 1.8975, respectively. They explained 41% of the variance among the 19 Q-sorts. The 19 Q-sorts charged the factors on the level of +/- 0.43 with a

significance of  $p < 0.01$ . Table 1 shows how each Q-sort charges on the groups of Q-sorts. Each correlation coefficient marked with “x” charges on the factor for the group.

### **From Factors to Factor Arrays**

Each of the 19 Q-sorts contributed to one of the three factors with its greatest rotated factor. They are marked with “x” in Table 1. Three Q-sorts were left out since their correlation value was less than 0.43, indicating that none of them charged significantly on any of the three factors. Factors 1 and 2 (F1 and F2) are defined by 7 Q-sorts on each, while 5 Q-sorts define factor 3 (F3). Each factor is composed by computing the degrees of similarities among the Q-sorts. The eigenvalue expresses the degrees of similarity. Each Q-sort charges on one factor and with its greatest correlation value.

### **From Factor Arrays to Factor Interpretations**

The participants’ Q-sorts that had a significant contribution to one factor signified an expression of similarities in these participants’ subjective experiences of the course. A task for the researchers was to interpret the qualities of the subjective experience connected with the factor. The interpretation was done in a process where the researchers sensed the perspective of the factor and how the concourse emerged from this perspective. A guide in this sensing was how the statements charged on the factor with values from -5 to +5. The statements considered in each factor differed by at least two points from one of the other factors. This made it possible to differentiate how the statements were valued on the factor. The factors were prepared for interpretation by making a list that showed how the statements charged on the factors.

## **Findings**

In the course, the students interacted with others in social settings, such as lectures and workshops, a supervision group, and in a practice where they were counselors. The significant others in these settings were teachers, supervisors, peers, clients, and participants in each student’s counseling practice. The students met the requirements to perform various tasks during the course, such as making a personal plan for achieving learning outcomes, making a genogram, writing a logbook, and studying the literature. The students were exposed to ideas, concepts, theories, and models, which they used to reflect on and learn from their experiences. In the reflections, they improved their skills and challenged and transformed their opinions, attitudes, and beliefs. Through the factor analysis the first research question was confirmed. The participants’ experiences varied systematically since the Q-sorts were significantly correlated in the three factors. We interpreted these factors and called them “building effective counseling relationships is fundamental” (F1), “the entirety of the course” (F2), and “self-reflection” (F3).

### **Building Effective Counseling Relationships is Fundamental**

The eigenvalue of F1 was 2.2773 and explained 13% of the variance. Seven participants made the Q-sorts that characterized F1.

The students who contributed to F1 learned from their communication with others in their practices and supervision groups more than from the assignments of writing texts or doing practical exercises. They understood counseling as facilitating a conversation, where clients felt safe to tell about experiences where they could be vulnerable and, in some way, at risk. They shared the opinion that theoretical knowledge, together with practical experience, provided the best knowledge. They experienced the course as addressing who they were as persons. However, they did not experience increased self-knowledge.

### **Self-knowledge and Reflection**

The students experienced the course as addressing who they were as persons (14: +3) (14 refers to the number of the item in the concourse [see the attachment]; +3 is the score of the item [see Figure 1]) and perceived that a prerequisite for counseling was self-knowledge of their personal history and values (18:

+2). To a lesser degree, they experienced the course as providing them with self-knowledge and making it easier for them to distinguish their personal history from the other's story (23: -2). They seemed in no need of learning to recognize themselves and focused on the tasks in which they succeeded (25: -1). We regard this as a sign of self-confidence in their ability to cope with challenges in counseling.

The students had a well-developed habit of self-reflection. They saw no need to improve such skills (21: 0). Reflecting on their own background and personal history had not clarified their roles as counselors (3: -2). The students seemed to take for granted an attitude where theoretical knowledge, together with practical experience, provided the best knowledge (1: +1). At the same time, they experienced it as less important to deepen their understanding of theory and their ability to relate theory to practice (15: -3). They viewed challenges and a little resistance as necessary, together with engagement, to create change processes in themselves (36: +1).

### **The Other**

The students' primary focus was to establish a basic relationship to provide the client with the necessary security to tell his or her story (6: +5). They underlined the importance of the feeling of safety in the group and how this influenced the counseling (12: +4). Their prejudiced thoughts did not enable them to help the other (22: 0). They were indifferent to being challenged to recognize people whose actions they could not accept (19: 0). They did not experience being better to identify different thought patterns in themselves and those they supervised (20: -2). They did not experience being confident in using more time to allow the other to think before interrupting his or her silence (5: -3).

### **Counseling**

For the students counseling was an effective conversation (17: +4). They considered a given fact their responsibility to prepare for counseling in a way that would benefit the client (2: 0). Learning from experimenting with methods was in the background of the students' consciousness (32: -1; 10: -4).

### **Valuable to Learning**

To a lesser degree, the students experienced working with a personal plan as making it clearer what they needed to work on (31: -2). The same was the case of learning from practical exercises (16: -3). The students were encouraged to write a logbook of reflections during the course, but they did not experience the logbook as important to their learning (28: -5). They experienced the supervision group as a valuable for learning (33: +3). Feedback from the participants in the student's practice was considered an important contribution to learning (27: +1).

### **The Entirety of the Course**

The eigenvalue of F2 was 2.5602 and explained 14% of the variance. Seven participants made the Q-sorts that characterized F2.

The students who contributed to F2 used the opportunities to learn in all the activities in the course, such as practice, group supervision, lectures, discussions, theories, and written and oral tasks. They experienced the course as self-development and appreciated how the course addressed who they were as persons. They considered the client's feeling of safety in his or her relationship to the counselor as basic, and they developed attitudes and skills to help them. They improved their learning by reflecting on themselves as persons and counselors. They did not experience experimenting with methods and developing their toolbox as valuable to learning.

### **Self-knowledge and Reflection**

The factor showed that the course drew the students' attention to who they were as persons to a larger degree than they expected (14: +3). They were invited to reflect on how their life experiences influenced their motivations, values, and attitudes toward others in providing counseling. They shared the belief that knowing oneself and one's personal history and values is a prerequisite for being a counselor (18: +4).

They promoted their professional development by cultivating reflection. They had a habit of using theory to reflect on their experiences in practice (15: 0). The students recognized the need to improve their self-reflection as persons and counselors (21: +3). They had an indifferent attitude toward metaphors as means to achieve a deeper understanding of themselves as counselors (7: 0). They also perceived theoretical knowledge as important when reflecting on their practical experience (1: +2).

### **The Other**

The factor showed the opinion that an effective relationship was basic for the clients to have the necessary security to tell their stories (6: +4). They became more patient in allowing people more time to think before they interrupted the silence (5: +1). They valued the importance of trust among participants in group counseling (12: +1). They did not expect their insecurity to vanish with increased experience as counselors (4: -4). Neither did they expect to meet people whom they could not respect (19: -4).

### **Counseling**

The students paid habitual attention to frames and contracts in counseling (26: -1). They experienced a presence in their counseling with the awareness of their bodies and feelings (8: +1). Various approaches to methods during the course did not seem to have any effect on their courage to experiment with methods (32: -1; 11: -3). They did not regard it as a challenge to improve their ability to detect thought patterns held by themselves or the other (20: -2). They seemed confident in letting the other think in silence for some time before interrupting (5: +1). In the counseling of individuals and groups, the duration of and breaking the silence did not constitute an actual theme for the students (5: -3). To a low degree, they valued a solid ethical and philosophical platform before applying various methods (9: -3). They did not perceive learning to counsel as an activity where they prepared themselves to use their own experiences in a way that would help the client (2: -5).

### **Valuable to Learning**

The students experienced the course with practice, group supervision, lectures, discussions, theories, and written and oral tasks as complementing one another and dovetailing well (34: +5). They experienced the course as emphasizing self-development. The logbook was a means to reflect on experiences and was important in learning to supervise (28: +1). To a lesser degree, developing and following a personal plan for learning made it clearer for the students what they needed to work on (31: -2). The work with metaphors was not considered especially useful (7: -4). The students did not experience feedback from others as important in the sense of influencing their beliefs in their abilities as counselors (24: -1; 27: -2).

The students did not experience being more secure in asking questions and listening to answers in their role as counselors (29: -1). To a lesser degree, they paid attention to experimenting with methods and making their toolbox (32: -1; 10: -4). The course did make some difference in their courage to take on new challenges and move past their comfort zones (35: +2).

### **Self-development**

The eigenvalue of F3 was 1.8975 and explained 14% of the variance. Five participants made the Q-sorts that characterized F3.

The students who contributed to F3 reflected on themselves as persons and counselors. They promoted their self-development by focusing on knowing themselves. They improved by paying attention to their emotions and presence in counseling. They experienced being more courageous to take on new challenges and move past their comfort zones. They understood an effective relationship as basic in counseling. Among the activities that they experienced as supporting their learning were practical exercises, experimenting with methods, and "new ways of doing things."



### Self-knowledge and Reflection

The students paid primary attention to themselves, as expressed when they valued how the course addressed who they were as persons (14: +1). They highly endorsed the course's conditions for self-development by focusing on knowing oneself through insights into one's personal history and values (18: +5). The course made it easier for them to distinguish their personal histories from the clients' stories (23: +1) and to recognize their strengths and focus on the tasks in which they succeeded (25: +2).

The students had a neutral attitude toward believing counseling to be about preparing oneself to use one's own experiences in a way that helped the other (2: 0). The course gave them the courage to take on new challenges and move past their comfort zones. They focused on their bodies and presence in counseling, which made them feel more secure in their counseling (8: +3).

They experienced the need to improve their self-reflection as persons and counselors (21: +3). By reflecting on their backgrounds and personal histories, they experienced being clearer in their positions as counselors (3: +4). The students did not find it exciting to challenge themselves with metaphors (7: -5).

### The Other

The students acknowledged an effective relationship as basic for creating the necessary safety for the other to tell his or her story (6: +3). The value of the other's feedback (24: -1) was not perceived as important. To a low degree, the students experienced a positive influence of their supervisor based on her own experiences, as well as a role model (13: -3; 30: -3).

### Counseling

The students had a neutral attitude toward how the course increased their skills in identifying thought patterns in themselves and others (20: 0). More than in the other factors, the students meant that their prejudiced thoughts did not help them in their counseling (22: -2). We recognize a consistency between the students' attention to methods and how they used these methods to inform their counseling.

"New ways of doing things" (11: +1) attracted them more than counseling as dialogue (17: -1). However, this did not occur in a way that they became more conscious of which methods to use, depending on the situation they were facing (10: -4). To a lesser degree, they valued the importance of setting up a solid ethical and philosophical platform before applying various methods (9: -3).

### Valuable to Learning

The students had a neutral attitude about practical exercises as means to prepare themselves as counselors (16: 0). They valued theoretical knowledge and practical experience as means to improve themselves. They perceived these types of knowledge as basic in their development as counselors (1: +2). They experienced the course with practice, group supervision, lectures, discussions, theories, and written and oral tasks as complementing one another (34: +2). An exception was their supervision group, which they experienced as a beneficial network for learning but to a lesser degree (33: -1). They missed receiving supervision from which they could learn. They also missed the supervisor as a good role model, whose experiences they could draw on (30: -3; 13: -3).

Their experience with the personal plan did not clarify what they needed to work on (31: -4). They did not experience support for self-reflection when working on the personal plan.

### Similarities and Differences among the Factors

F1 differs from F2 and F3 in the primary attention to dialogue and the feeling of safety that would enable the other to tell his or her story. The importance of reflection on personal history and values is in the background. Reflecting on practical experiences as counselors in their supervision groups occupies the foreground. In the F1 group, theoretical knowledge is valued less than the other factors.

F2 differs from F1 and F3 in the students' ways of gaining benefits from all the activities in the course. They feel safe when counseling clients. They have the courage to challenge themselves in their

relationships with them. They understand the limitations of using their own experiences in counseling the other. They have a well-developed habit of using theory to guide their reflections.

F3 differs from F1 and F2 in the focus on the competence needed to shift the attention from oneself to the other in counseling. In the F3 group, the students value practical exercises, where they often experience more tolerance for trial and error than counseling in authentic situations. Our understanding is that the experience of exercises can feel safer when building self-confidence. The reflections of the F3 group are to a lesser degree guided by theoretical perspectives compared with the F1 and the F2 groups.

## Discussion

We discuss the second research question: “How can researchers, supervisors, and teachers understand variations in students’ experiences of learning to counsel from the perspective of the theory of professional development?” The theories describe levels or phases in the development. The IDM (Stoltenberg & McNeill, 2010) argue for three trainee levels and an additional one for graduated counselors. On each level, professional development unfolds in a structure of self-awareness and other-awareness, motivation, and degree of autonomy. Comparing the three factors (F1-F3) with the IDM shows a striking similarity in how self-awareness and other-awareness advances from attention to the self, to the other, and to the interaction between the counselor and the client in context. We discuss our understanding of each factor from the perspectives of Levels 1–3.

The IDM refines the structures in the domains (see the Introduction section). Not all domains in the model are relevant to our data. The relevant ones are intervention skills, interpersonal assessment, and client conceptualization.

### Attention to Self

We find that the factor *self-development* has similarities with Level 1. On this level, self-awareness and other-awareness are characterized by cognitive and affective orientations. In a cognitive orientation, the trainee has a self-focus and simultaneously a limited self-awareness. In an affective orientation, the trainee has some degree of performance anxiety in the interactions with the client. Compared to the cognitive orientation, the students in the course learn to know themselves by gaining insights into their histories and values. They learn by taking on new challenges and moving past their comfort zones. They reflect on themselves as counselors. In an affective orientation, the students need to feel safe in their relationship with the client to cope with spontaneous and unpredictable themes in the conversation. They understand their responsibility to create a secure environment for the clients to tell their stories.

On Level 1 the trainees are highly motivated to learn and develop their skills as counselors (Reynolds, 1942; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2012; Stoltenberg & McNeill, 2010). We observe the students’ motivation in how they engage in the learning activities in the course. They expect to feel insecure in some parts of their conversations with their clients. Their attitude is to learn from each event. The course has motivated the students to challenge themselves. They do not doubt their competence as counselors.

Autonomy is a dimension in the theory of professional development (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2012; Stoltenberg & McNeill, 2010). On Level 1 the trainees are dependent on teachers and supervisors and the structures offered by these mentors during learning. We find this confirmed in our analysis. The students also express their autonomy in trusting in their ability to create an environment where the clients felt safe to tell their stories. The students feel confident in responding to the themes in their clients’ stories and the ways to handle their own insecurities in how to continue in some parts of the counseling.

### Attention to the Other

We find that the factor *building effective counseling relationships is fundamental* has similarities with Level 2. On this level, the trainees’ cognitive orientation regarding self-awareness and other-awareness focus on the clients and the latter’s world (Reynolds, 1942; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2012; Stoltenberg & McNeill, 2010). The trainees pay attention to the clients’ experiences, attitudes, values, motivations, and

intentions. In an affective orientation, the trainees are past the anxiety that they experienced on Level 1. The trainees trust themselves in their conversations with the clients and develop empathy.

We note similarities in the students' attention to their relationships with their clients. In a cognitive orientation, they take their clients' perspectives, exploring how the clients perceive and understand their situations, as well as how they listen and respond to the clients. They do not take a one-sided responsibility for the outcome of the counseling. In an affective orientation, they feel safe and self-confident in their relationships with the clients. They perceive themselves as responsible for establishing relationships where the clients trust them. They are confident in responding to unpredictable themes and utterances and can improvise in the conversations. They are attentive to their limitations regarding the themes brought up in the conversations.

On Level 2 the trainees' motivation levels fluctuate with the variations in their confidence in performing their responsibilities, functions, and tasks (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2012; Stoltenberg & McNeill, 2010). If their ability in a domain is confirmed and recognized, they maintain and increase their motivation. If the opposite is the case, their motivation often decreases.

We understand the students' preferences for certain learning activities in the course as signs of their motivation to improve as counselors. One such learning activity is supervision. The students value feedback from their supervisors and peers in the supervision group, as well as from their clients. The students provide feedback through interpersonal oral communication. To a lesser extent, they are motivated by learning activities, such as developing and following a personal plan, performing practical exercises, and writing in a logbook. All these activities need self-reflection. We observe that the students seek recognition of their competencies in interpersonal communication.

On Level 2 the trainees develop their competence toward increased autonomy, but an experience of a lack of ability reminds them of their dependence on their supervisors (Reynolds, 1942; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2012; Stoltenberg & McNeill, 2010). A common issue among these levels is a dependency-autonomy conflict with a supervisor.

The students in the course show their autonomy as facilitators in cultivating an effective relationship with their clients. Their aim is to improve their ability to ask questions and listen to the clients. We view this orientation as a means to improve their intervention skills which happened by discussing their experiences in the supervision group.

### **Attention to Self and the Other in Context**

We find that the factor *the entirety of the course* has similarities with Level 3. On this level, the cognitive orientation of self-awareness and other-awareness is manifested when the trainees realize and accept their own strengths and weaknesses, as well as those of their clients (Reynolds, 1942; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2012; Stoltenberg & McNeill, 2010). The trainees recognize and understand the client's perspective. They understand the interactions in the trainee–client relationship in specific contexts and periods of time. They understand how the trainee and the client influence each other. In an affective orientation, the trainees are aware of their empathy for their clients and use their spontaneous feelings to guide their responses to the clients' utterances.

In a cognitive orientation, the students in the course gather, categorize, and integrate sense-based and text-based information from various sources and perspectives. They value the study of theories, their practice as counselors, performing exercises, participating in the supervision in their practice, and reflecting by writing logs and assignments. They acknowledge how these activities interact to support their learning and how they receive support from the various learning activities. They reflect systematically on their experiences to determine how intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships, situations, and contexts influence the process of counseling. When falling short of their intentions for the counseling, they learn from their failures and undertake new and adjusted trials. They contribute to developing professional knowledge by discussing their new knowledge with peers, researchers, and clients. In an affective orientation, the students are confident in their practice as counselors.

On Level 3 the trainees' motivations are stable within a domain. They do not doubt their career choice despite their occasional failure in a counseling process with a client. We find the students' motivation in how they positively engage in the learning activities in the course. The course has motivated the students to challenge themselves. They do not doubt their competence as counselors.

On Level 3 the trainees have conditional dependence on their supervisors, connected to cases where processes stagnate, and the trainees are in doubt about why such an impasse has occurred. In the course the students express their autonomy in trusting in their ability to create an environment where the clients feel safe to tell their stories. The students are comfortable with responding to the themes in the clients' stories. They expect to feel insecure in some parts of their conversations with the clients, and they accept this fact. Their attitude is to learn from each event as supervisees.

Stoltenberg and McNeill (2010) argue for a fourth level (Level 3i), characterized by the professionals' ability to transfer their competence between contexts and adapt to changing requirements. We find no information that makes it reasonable to claim that the students have developed their competence on par with Level 3i.

## Conclusion

Our awareness of aspects to consider is influenced by the knowledge of the variations among students' experiences of learning. We found the aspects to be attitudes, relationships, learning activities and interactions. Attitudes concerns teachers' view of individual students and how students value individual and social learning among peers. Our attention is drawn to the systematic variation in levels of development and individual needs among students with a background as experienced professionals. The students adopted the learning culture of the course when they value personal development and aimed to meet the client in a conversation in a personal relationship. The students valued to communicate in conversations more than training in methods and work with metaphors,

The students were in intra- and interpersonal relationships. They preferred both self-reflections and reflections in social activities as practice of counseling, supervision and discussions on issues presented in lectures. Activities designed for self-reflection in solitary work as logbook and personal plan, were not among highly valued activities.

We see that the learning activities did not meet the primary needs of all the students all the time. However, all the students experienced to be engaged in learning activities that suited their needs at some time. We found that the variation among activities did generate skills and personal knowledge among the students. The main activities were conversation in counseling practice, group supervision, and lectures. The students generated knowledge on their level by interacting with ideas from experience, theory, methods, and personal life experiences.

The interaction among attitude, relationships and learning activities inform the implementation of a curriculum for a part-time counseling course. The teacher's challenge is to see the systematic variation in developmental level, need among the students and afford challenges that are suitable.

The frame of this study was the students' professional development in a part-time, two-year course. After the study, we know what kinds of experiences trigger and enhance the students' learning. We find striking similarities with theories of professional development. A theme for further research is an exploration of how frames and learning activities in a course may be designed to address the variety of students' pre-knowledge and progression through levels during the course.

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## Appendix

### Statements in the Q-sorting

Number	Item
1	Theoretical knowledge forms the foundation, and together with practical experience, it provides the best knowledge.
2	Counseling is about preparing oneself to use one's own experiences in a way that benefits the other.
3	Reflecting on my own background and personal history has clarified my role as a counselor.
4	Insecurity will probably be felt when one is counseling, but I am confident that this feeling will become more seldom as I gain experience.
5	I see that I have been more confident, and I use more time to allow people to think before I interrupt the silence.
6	An effective relationship is fundamental for the other to feel safe enough to tell his or her story.
7	Working with metaphors has been useful for me. It is exciting to challenge myself with new metaphors, listen to other students' metaphors, and mirror mine in theirs.
8	Focusing on my body and presence in counseling has contributed to my feeling of increased security as a counselor.
9	I see the importance of a solid ethical/philosophical platform in the beginning of the course, before applying various methods.
10	I have been more conscious of methods, implying that I have learned something that tells me what is useful in each situation.
11	The course has given me the courage to explore new ways of doing things and to trust myself. I will look for new jobs in other areas and introduce myself as a counselor.
12	I have experienced how important it is to focus on creating trust in the group and how this influences counseling.
13	I have learned a lot from my group supervisor, who has a great foundation of experiences that I could draw on.
14	I have not anticipated that the course in counseling should address, to such a degree, who I am as a person.
15	It has been important for me to deepen my understanding of theory and relate it to practice. This has made me more systematic in reflecting on both theory and my own experiences in practice.
16	For me, the best way of learning is through practical exercises.
17	I have discovered that I am not occupied with methods, but counseling for me is engaging in dialogue — an effective conversation.
18	The focus of the course has largely been self-development; a prerequisite for counseling another person is to understand myself and my personal history and values.

19	As a counselor, I might meet people whose actions I cannot or do not agree with; despite this, I must try to recognize them as human beings.
20	I have become better to identify different thought patterns in myself and those I counsel and at consciously choosing different thought patterns for myself.
21	I need to be better at self-reflection as both a person and a counselor. Being in contact with my bodily reactions has been important to me.
22	It seems to me that my prejudiced thoughts have not helped me at all. They have made me out of balance about what I could contribute.
23	The course has increased my self-awareness and made it easier for me to distinguish my personal history from my client's story.
24	Feedback from those whom I have counseled has been important for my development as a counselor.
25	I have learned to recognize my strengths and focus on what I do best.
26	Something I will take with me is the importance of frames and contracts in counseling, which contribute to a safe and good dynamic in the supervision groups.
27	For me, the most important components of the course have been my counseling practice and feedback from the participants there. They have made me believe that I have something to contribute as a counselor.
28	The logbook of reflections has contributed to my increased awareness. It has been important in my learning as a counselor.
29	I am more secure in my role as a counselor and have developed my skills in asking questions and listening.
30	By undergoing supervision, I have learned much and have had good role models. The effective supervisors managed to create security in the group by acknowledging and engaging with their supervisees. I want to demonstrate the same qualities as a counselor.
31	Following/developing a personal plan for my learning in the course has clarified what I need to work on.
32	Various approaches during the course have given me the courage to experiment with methods and to develop my own toolbox.
33	The supervision group in the course has been a beneficial network for learning and has contributed to my increased confidence as a counselor.
34	I have experienced the course with practice, group supervision, lectures, discussions, theories, and written and oral tasks as complementing one another and dovetailing well.
35	During the course, I have been emboldened to take on new challenges and step out of my comfort zone.
36	Challenges and some resistance are necessary, together with engagement, to create changes in myself.