

From Theory to Practice: Assessing Counselling Skill Development Through Role-Play and Instructor-Led Evaluation**Salima Barkat Ali ¹, Nameera Shakeel ², Shamsha Shamsy ³**¹ Department of Psychology, Iqra University. Email: Salima.ahsan@iqra.edu.pk² Department of Psychology, Iqra University. Email: IU04-0325-1646@iqra.edu.pk³ Western University. Email: sshamsy@uwo.ca***DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63163/jpehss.v4i1.1301>*****Abstract**

Counselling psychology focuses on interpersonal and technical skills that are required in successful professional practice. Role-play is a teaching strategy through experiential learning that is commonly used in the counselling teaching activities in order to support the acquisition of skills but systematic measurement of skill acquisition in counselling through standardized measures is scarce. In the current paper, the author will focus on the relevance of structured role-play activities in the development of counselling competencies and will identify the effectiveness of instructor-based assessment by using the Counselling Skills and Competencies Tool (CSCT). Using theoretical backgrounds on the counselling psychology and past empirical studies, this research will help to fill gaps in the literature regarding competency-based assessment in educational contexts. The research questions and hypotheses are centered on the development of skills, validity of the assessment, and the correlation between the performance in role playing and the perceived competence and confidence of students. The results will have a potential impact on evidence-based teaching in counselling psychology education in terms of supporting systematic experiential learning and regular assessment procedures.

Keywords: Role-play, counselling psychology, counselling skills, experiential learning, competency-based assessment.

Introduction

Counselling is a professional and cooperating process that is meant to assist individuals on making informed decisions and taking actions on those. It entails therapeutic rapport where the counsellor is an active listener and supports the plight of solving personal challenges. The development of this relationship is through trust and unconditional positive regard. The conceptualization of counselling as a systematic psychological process, involves active participation on the part of the counsellors and the clients to comprehend issues, devise workable solutions and facilitate the decision-making process. Under this process, counselling leads to the identification, nurturing and proper utilization of the potential of individuals to improve personal functioning and welfare (VU, n.d.). Counseling Psychology is a generalist health service (HSP) specialty in professional psychology that uses a broad range of culturally-informed and culturally-sensitive practices to help people improve their well-being, prevent and alleviate distress and maladjustment, resolve crises, and increase their ability to function better in their lives. It focuses specifically but not exclusively on normative life-span development, with a particular emphasis on prevention and education as well as amelioration, addressing individuals as well as the systems or contexts

in which they function. It has particular expertise in work and career issues (APA, 2022). The psychological theory and empirical research inform counselling practice and therefore sets it apart in comparison with informal advisory functions commonly referred to as counselling in non-professional settings. Early theorists like Rogers, Ellis, Beck and Berne have left their mark in the modern counselling theories which offer systematic models of attaining knowledge on human behavior and assisting in change. Such theories inform the counselling process itself and the measurement of counselling results, which is why systematic training and evaluation is significant to counsellor education.

Theoretical Framework

Philosophical Foundations

The philosophical views on human agency, responsibility and freedom have influenced the theory and practice of counselling. The philosophical model proposed by Arbuckle (1975) highlighted responsible and free individual as someone who exhibits consistency between attitudes and behaviors, and adjusts the understanding of freedom and responsibility depending on cultural conditions and does not impose much control over other people. These are the principles, which support the ethical practice of counselling and are used in the construction of therapeutic relationships.

Sociological Foundations

Sociological schools of thought emphasize social structures and organizations as sources of individual behavior. According to Merton (1957), the social adaptation theory suggested that there are five ways, conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism and rebellion, which people react to societal norms. These sociological perspectives can be applied in counselling practice because they put individual behavior into context of a larger social system, and shape culturally responsive interventions.

Psychological Foundations

Psychological roots of counselling are based on the greatest theoretical approaches explaining human behavior in terms of subjective experience, unconscious experience and patterns of behavior and thought that can be seen. Humanistic psychology states that people are meaning-oriented and intentional people who actively build the sense of understanding with the help of lived experiences. Humanistic theorists focus on the phenomenological world of the client and assume that personal interpretations of reality influence thoughts, emotions, and actions. In this view, empathy, self-awareness, authenticity and agency in personal development are considered to be central to psychological development, thus contributing to self-directed change and ethical, client-centered counselling relationships (Chen, 2001).

On the contrary, psychodynamic theory accounts for the actions of individuals focusing on unconscious motives, childhood experiences, and unresolved emotional issues. Psychodynamic approaches tend to believe that current behavior is based on internal conflicts based on the past, and the treatment methods of free association, dreams interpretation, transference and resistance exploration help in gain of insight and self-awareness of emotions, thus leading to personality change in the long run (Sandu and Nistor, 2020). The cognitive-behavioral theory also adds to the psychological roots of counselling in the sense that cognition plays a pivotal role in the development of emotional and behavioral reactions. Cognitive-behavioral theory holds that maladaptive thought patterns and learned behaviors are the cause of psychological distress. Clients can adjust dysfunctional cognitions and behaviors using structured, goal-oriented interventions including cognitive restructuring, self-monitoring, skill training, and problem-solving and achieve effective coping and symptom reduction. Together, these psychological views offer a holistic context of explaining human behavior and enhancing the appropriate counselling practice (Sandu and Nistor, 2020).

Significance of Counselling Psychology Training

Competency-based model models like the Model Training Program (MTP) typically guide the training in counselling psychology. The MTP offers an inspirational outlay of designing and delivering doctoral

training in counselling psychology, and is useful in differentiating the specialty and adjacent mediums of clinical or school psychology. One of the key characteristics of the model is the combination of science and practice whereby the trainees are also developed to be research literate and clinical proficient. The MTP focuses on quantifiable competency-based learning outcomes to equip students to comprehend the theoretical concepts, as well as, to exhibit evidence-based counselling behaviors and interventions. This framework entails the core values of diversity, social justice, and cultural competence instead of being peripheral concerns. As a result, the training modules relevant to the MTP are aimed at equipping counsellors to be effective when dealing with different groups of people and complicated psychosocial problems (Scheel, Stabb, Cohn, Duan, & Sauer, 2018).

Key Competencies of Counsellors

Coupled with the interpersonal skills, technical skills are needed to accomplish effective counselling. Trust and open communication in the therapeutic relationship is helped by core interpersonal skills such as active listening, empathy, and rapport-building. Technical skills include diagnostic interview, goal setting and outcome evaluation usually facilitated by standardized assessment tool. Practical skills can be developed to a higher level such as crisis intervention, motivational interviewing, and mindfulness-based approaches which would help counsellors meet various needs of clients. The building of counselling competencies is encouraged by using graduate-level training, supervised practice, continuing professional training, and continuous self-reflection. Self-awareness plays an essential role especially in avoiding professional burnout and in holding on to ethical practice. The modern-day issues which have seen the further virtualization of counselling service delivery necessitate counsellors to extend the conventional skills, especially those concerned with analysis of nonverbal behavior, to the online environments. All these competencies, combined, help counsellors to combine theory and practice and to provide interventions that are both customized and evidence-based to improve client outcomes (Win, H. Counseling Psychology: Theories, Practice, and Skills)

Literature Review

The effectiveness of role-play as a pedagogical strategy in the acquisition of practical and interpersonal skills is proven in the previous research. Medical and health education studies have demonstrated that scenario-based role-play is an effective way to improve communication, teamwork, and applied skill performance. Students who participate in organized role-play practices usually succeed in comparison to those who are taught by giving only didactic instruction, especially in practical skills tests. Role-play also offers a secure and controlled space where learners can learn professional behaviors that are applicable in disciplines of interpersonal actions like counselling (Lavanya, Somu, & Mishra, 2024).

The education of counsellors also supports experiential learning methods based on research. Role-plays, simulated counselling sessions, and practicum experiences have been considered as usual and effective strategies to develop the skills and have been identified as the results of scoping reviews of the methods of participatory teaching. These strategies have been linked with confidence among students and improved counselling competencies and professional identity formation (Campbell & Babb, 2023).

Additional evidence from mental health education highlights the role of clinical role-play and reflective practice in improving interpersonal and therapeutic competencies. Integrative reviews have reported gains in empathy, communication skills, and student engagement, particularly when role-play is paired with guided reflection and peer observation (Rønning & Bjørkly, 2019). Furthermore, motivation-related outcomes have been documented in randomized controlled trials, which indicate that role-play simulation enhances student motivation, learning strategies, and collaborative behaviors (Bouriami, Boussaa, & El Adib, 2025).

While previous research shows that role-play and experiential learning improve counselling-related skills, there is limited empirical evidence on the structured evaluation of student counselling competencies using standardized assessment tools within educational settings. Additionally, the relationship between students' demonstrated competencies in role-play sessions and their practical learning outcomes or skill acquisition has not been fully explored, especially in counselling psychology courses.

Research Questions

RQ1: How does participation in structured role-play sessions influence students' counselling skill development in a counselling psychology course?

RQ2: What is the effectiveness of instructor-led evaluation using a standardized tool, specifically the Counselling Skills and Competencies Tool, in measuring students' counselling competencies?

RQ3: Is there a relationship between students' performance in role-play exercises and their overall competence and confidence in applying counselling strategies?

Hypotheses

H1: Students who participate in structured role-play sessions will demonstrate significantly higher counselling skill development compared to their baseline performance.

H2: Instructor-led evaluation using the Counselling Skills and Competencies Tool will provide a reliable and valid measure of students' counselling competencies.

H3: There will be a positive correlation between students' role-play performance scores and their self-reported confidence and perceived competence in applying counselling strategies.

Method

Participants

The population size of the study was a total of 28 undergraduate students taking a course in counselling psychology in one of the educational institutions. Subjects were both males and females and they represented an academic background. The study was voluntary and all the students gave informed consent before they participated in the research. Convenience sampling was applied to select the sample since all the respondents were students who were presently taking the course.

Procedure

The development of counselling skills was evaluated by tracking a period with the help of the mixed-methods design. The information gathering was done within four months. Each of the participants took a Counselling Skills and Competencies Tool (CSCT) and a small number of qualitative questions three times: Pre-intervention: The CSCT and qualitative questions were administered to the participants, prior to the teaching of the counselling psychology course, to determine the baseline competencies. Mid-intervention: Following theoretical training on counselling strategies, the CSCT was once again administered to determine the extent to which knowledge is integrated and skills awareness. Post intervention: After the instruction on practical implications and role-play simulation exercise of a counselling session, the CSCT and qualitative questions were the last questions to be administered to the participants to test the development of the skills.

Measures

Counselling Skills and Competencies Tool (CSCT): The CSCT is a standardized tool that evaluates the basic skills and competencies of counselling processes in various areas, such as attending, reflecting, questioning, establishing therapeutic alliance, and facilitating sessions. Ratings are done on a scale of 1–5, with high scores representing high competence. The CSCT has a high content validity, internal consistency ($\alpha = .90$), inter-rater reliability and responsive to skill development with training (Fowler, OGorman and Lynch, 2021).

Qualitative Questions: To identify the subjective experience and thoughts of the participants regarding the development of their counselling skills, three more items were added. Two of the items were open-ended, where the students could describe the strengths and the areas that needed improvement about the counselling skit. The third question was of a Likert-type nature, which allowed the participants to evaluate their general performance in using counselling strategies on a 1–5-scale.

Results

A manual thematic analysis was conducted by 28 undergraduate psychology students after taking the counselling psychology course were manually themed analyzed using a thematic method. The responses were read repeatedly, coded in recurring concepts and divided into general themes.

It was done by counting frequencies to establish the preeminence of each theme. There were six significant themes resulting out of the data (see Table 1).

Shift From Advice-Giving to Client-Centered Understanding

Most of the participants ($n = 26$, 93%), claimed that they had a transformation in their perception of counselling. Before the course, commonly held by students is the view of counselling as advice-giving or actual problem solving. After the theoretical teaching and role-play, the students defined counselling as a learning process that is structured, ethical, and client-oriented aimed at helping the client explore themselves.

Training of Core Counselling Skills

Almost all respondents ($n = 27$, 96 percent) claimed an improvement of core counselling micro-skills. Active listening and empathy ($n = 27$) and reflection of feelings ($n = 23$) were the most common identified skills, and were followed by open-ended questioning ($n = 18$) and managing silence ($n = 17$).

Increased Self-Awareness and Recognition of Limitations

A large percentage of the respondents ($n = 22$, 79%) indicated improved self-awareness on personal biases, emotional triggers, communication styles and pre-emptive advice tendencies.

Emotional Growth Through Role-Play

The majority of participants had reported feeling nervous or nervous at the beginning of the role-play ($n = 25$, 89%). Nevertheless, 24 students (86) wrote about slow growing confidence and empowerment with time.

Reduction of the Theory–Practice Gap

Most of the participants ($n = 24$, 86% explicit) directly stated that there was a distance between the theoretical knowledge and practical use of the skills in counselling. The role-play was viewed as a facilitative bridge, which helped in experiential knowledge.

Perceived Readiness for Practice

A large proportion of students ($n=23$, 82), noted feeling moderately ready to take part in the supervised counselling or helping situations.

Table 1

Themes Emerging from Student Reflections ($N = 28$)

Theme	n	%
Shift to Client-Centered Understanding	26	93
Development of Core Counselling Skills	27	96
Increased Self-Awareness	22	79

Emotional Growth (Anxiety to Confidence)	25	89
Reduction of Theory–Practice Gap	24	86
Moderate Readiness for Practice	23	82

Discussion:

This research project was to evaluate counselling proficiency acquisition by role-play and instructor-based evaluation in a course of counselling psychology at the undergraduate level. The results of the thematic analysis give a firm support to the effectiveness of experiential learning in facilitating the acquisition of skills and development of a professional identity.

The significant change of the attitude towards advice giving to the perception of client centered elaboration suggests the cognitive restructuring of the role of the counsellor. This revolution is an indicator of conformity to collaborative and humanistic therapeutic models.

Students also indicated that core counselling micro-skills such as active listening, empathy, and reflection were developed. Such findings are corroborated by the experiential learning theory, which argues that competence is gained by taking action and not passively learning.

Growth in self-awareness and appreciation of constraint are some of the indications of reflective practice. A combination of anxiety and confidence that followed after the role-play due to emotions helped in resilience and development of empathy.

On balance, the results indicate that structured role-play which is accompanied by instructor feedback is effective in increasing both technical competence and professional development.

Limitations:

Despite meaningful findings, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study relied on self-reported reflections, which may be influenced by social desirability bias.

Second, the sample size was 28 undergraduates of one institution, which made it difficult to generalize.

Third, the lack of a control group limits the drawing of causal inferences on the sole effects of role-play activities.

Fourth, the qualitative analysis was performed by hand, which could provide a subjective perspective of the researcher even though the coding was systematic.

Lastly, readiness to counselling practice was assessed through self code as opposed to standardized assessment on competencies.

Recommendations:

To handle the detected limitations, a number of recommendations are put forward on the counselling education and research work in the future.

To mitigate the problem of self-reported reflections, multiple measures of assessment should increase the validity of the study, including observational ratings, instructor ratings, and standardized competency measures, which will reduce the social desirability bias.

Second, the sample size of future researchers should be larger and more diverse, which will be based on more than one institution to enhance the generalizability.

Third, experimental or quasi-experimental designs would also allow the inclusion of control or comparison groups that would allow having a clearer conclusion about the particular effects of role-play and instructor-led evaluation.

Fourth, to reduce qualitative analysis subjectivity of the researcher, multiple independent coders should be used, inter-rater reliability should be calculated, and systematic coding or qualitative software must be used.

Lastly, since practice readiness is largely a self-reported variable, future studies ought to adopt standardized performance assessments and longitudinal studies to determine the possibility of sustained professional competence after perceived skills increase. These measures would improve methodological rigor and evidence-based counselling training.

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