

Counselor Trainees' Views on Their Forthcoming Experiences in Practicum Course

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Abstract

Problem Statement: The counseling profession requires specific education and training to equip counselor trainees with necessary knowledge and skills. Therefore, they are required not only to acquire theoretical knowledge but also to integrate it into practice. Especially, the integration of theoretical knowledge into practice is optimally possible with practicum. Although practicum provides a context such integration, it also leads to some negative thoughts and feelings among trainees. Experiencing anxiety and other feelings of incompetence impedes their professional development. Therefore, the critical task is to enable them to cope with negative feelings and experiences such as anxiety during their training process. In this context, taking account trainees' experiences and feelings as counselors during the formal education process makes important contributions to their personal and professional development.

Purpose of Study: To support the development of counselor trainees and make their educational and training processes fully functional, understanding the nature and antecedents of these negative experiences and feelings becomes critical. This study was conducted to understand the counselor trainees' predictions about their experiences as counselors during practicum course and to reveal the sources of feelings related to these predictions.

Methods: This research was a qualitative study based on focus group interviews. The researcher and two research assistants conducted interviews with two groups consisting of a total of 13 trainees taking an Individual Counseling Practicum Course. Open-ended questions were

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asked during interviews. Data was analyzed by means of inductive analysis.

Findings and Results: As a result of the inductive analysis, four main themes of *Counselor Trainees' Feelings, Professional Practice Issues in the Counseling Process, Evaluation Anxiety, and Supervision* emerged. When counselor trainees' feelings about practices were examined, feelings of confusion, anxiety, excitement, curiosity, and fear were reported. Most of their fear and anxiety was explained in terms of professional practice issues such as being professional, managing the counseling process, etc. Evaluation anxiety was revealed as another source of the trainees' negative feelings, as they were preoccupied with being good counselors. The supervision process was evaluated more positively.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Findings revealed counselor trainees' views on what they believed they would experience and feel with regard to practicum before this course. It was found that trainees were anxious and worried due to the ambiguities of practicum experience. Based on these findings, in order to provide better counselor trainee education and more effective psychological counseling services, carefully dealing with incompetence feelings and their sources is proposed. Although this study reveals important findings about trainees, it has some limitations. This study was carried out as a qualitative study with a limited number of participants. Therefore, similar studies should be conducted with larger groups. In later studies, diary use and observations can be employed for data triangulation. Longitudinal studies can be conducted to understand deeply trainees' feelings throughout the professional developmental process.

Keywords: Counselor training, counselor's professional development, counselor trainees' anxiety, counselor trainees' feelings of incompetence

Introduction

Counseling as a helping profession requires specific education and training to equip trainees with the necessary knowledge and skills and eventually to provide them with a counselor identity (Levitt & Jacques, 2005), as the target of the counseling profession is individuals in need of help. Moreover, the effectiveness of counseling is based mainly on the counselor's characteristics rather than the methods and techniques used (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Therefore, counselor education is critical. The quality of counselor education is also vital because conducting counseling properly entails simultaneously taking into account many more things such as the client's speech, thoughts, feelings, behaviors, etc. (Barrett-Lennard, 1998).

Based on all the information provided by clients, counselors are supposed to hypothesize about their clients' problems and issues and then test these hypotheses (Welfel & Patterson, 2005). That is, being analytical, spontaneous, authentic, and

emphatic (Levitt & Jacques, 2005) are prerequisites to becoming an effective counselor. Although these characteristics are fostered by courses on the knowledge level, trainees are required to integrate their theoretical knowledge into practice (Woodside, Oberman, Cole, & Carruth, 2007). The optimal integration of knowledge and skills into practice is possible through practicum course (MacMillan, & Clark, 1998). Although practicum course provides a context for putting acquired skills and knowledge into practice, it leads to some thoughts and negative feelings in trainees (Woodside et al., 2007) because the practicum course is the first step for almost all of them.

Trainees perceive this practicum course as a stage in which they should demonstrate their repertoire they have acquired (Woodside et al., 2007) throughout their entire education, because they try to abandon old and nonprofessional strategies like giving advice to counselees (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Instead, they try to apply accumulated theoretical knowledge and professional methods to the counseling process (Woodside et al., 2007). Although they are rigorous in the use of theoretical knowledge, professional methods, and techniques (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003), they are unclear about which methods and techniques should be used at what time (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003). To overcome this uncertainty, they look for precise strategies and methods to use in counseling sessions in the initial phases of their developmental process (Jenings, Goh, Skovholt, Hanson, & Banerjee-Stevens, 2003). That is, they try to find the best alternative response (Granello, 2002). Due to this preoccupation with finding a single truth instead of possible truths (Jenings et al., 2003) they have difficulties attending to clients, being authentically present, and establishing rapport, and eventually they cannot help their clients (Levitt & Jacques, 2005). As a result, they self-assess and question whether their personal characteristics are appropriate for counseling in general, if they have the necessary skills to enable them to fulfill the requirements of practicum course, and if they can strike a balance between theory and application (Thériault, Gazzola, & Richardson, 2009).

In addition to self-evaluation, counselor trainees are faced with the evaluation of their performance by supervisors (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003). Therefore, they feel under pressure and become anxious, they cannot listen to clients effectively, they are afraid that they cannot focus on the process, they cannot respond to what counselees share, and they get stuck. Practicum students want to take control of decreasing their anxiety and to try to be effective counselors by managing the session efficiently (Jennings et al., 2003), but it's impossible to predict what will happen during sessions. As a result, practicum students initially have no idea about how to cope with clients' resistance and crying, and subsequently they succumb to anxiety (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003).

Despite all this ambiguity, counselors strive with all their strength and are preoccupied not only with keeping track of the counselee, but also the counseling process and themselves as counselors (Egan, 2002). In addition, they endeavor to use counseling techniques and skills in the right place and at the right time spontaneously (Thériault & Gazzola, 2005) and to establish a balance between

supervision and interventions at sessions (Cormier & Hackney, 2007/2014). However, they are not competent enough to cope with all these challenges simultaneously (Jordan & Kelly, 2011). Thus, when counselor trainees adopt the professional role of counselor in practicum course, they are challenged and experience feelings of incompetence. Feelings of incompetence (FOI) are the emotions and thoughts that arise when therapists' beliefs in their abilities, judgments, and/or effectiveness in their roles as therapists are reduced or challenged internally (Thériault, 2003, 34). In the literature it was shown that all therapists, even experienced ones, have these incompetence feelings at varying levels, reflected in the form of anxiety, fear, confusion, and insecurity (Thériault & Gazzola, 2005; Thériault et al., 2009). Counselors doubted their knowledge, training, skills and ability to help. They were worried about doing the right thing and being effective in general. Also, counselors asked themselves whether they were good therapists or not. They were also worried about helping or damaging their counselees and their contributions in general. Counselors questioned whether their personal characteristics were appropriate for the counseling process (Thériault & Gazzola, 2005).

In another study investigating the sources of FOI, a lack of theoretical knowledge and experience and insufficient training were found as causes of incompetence feelings. Participants explained their FOI with their failure in engaging clients in the counseling process. Specifically, counselors reported that working with resistant clients became a source of their incompetence feelings (Thériault & Gazzola, 2006).

Novice therapists stated that they react to FOI with negative responses such as making technical errors and being distracted-disengaged-detached during sessions. Since the self-evaluation issue was constant among novice therapists, they searched for positive evaluative statements from their clients. To gain approval from clients, they exhibited technically flawed behaviors such as giving advice and imposing their own solutions to clients. They tried to reduce the negative effects of FOI by consulting supervisors (Thériault et al., 2009). Jordan & Kelly (2004) investigated beginning practicum students' worries about being counselors. The most frequently reported source of worry was concerns about competence and effectiveness. Participants explained some part of their worries as being concerned with their preparedness to work as counselors.

In a study investigating prepracticum students' perspectives on learning to be a counselor (Woodside et al., 2007), all participants reported anxiety about their lack of counseling skills and training. They questioned whether counseling was appropriate for them. Some of them stated that since they hadn't done any counseling sessions, they did not know whether they had the skills necessary to perform counseling. Therefore, they were afraid of hurting clients. The ambiguity of the counseling process led to fear in counselor trainees, so they reviewed their decision to become counselors (Woodside et al., 2007). Similarly, counseling students reported anxiety, excitement, and stress about the ambiguous nature of the class before class began (Knight, 2013).

Novice trainees' experiences, feelings, and concerns about their developmental processes were investigated. They were worried about their reactions to clients and

learning and using helping skills. Since trainees were worried about how to manage sessions, they had anxiety about forthcoming sessions. Trainees complained about not being fully present with clients and being distracted due to over-involvement with themselves. They also reported anxiety about their objectivity. They were concerned about difficulties in relating to clients empathetically because of their failure to handle differences or be sympathetic. They feared working with resistant and involuntary clients and displaying nonprofessional behaviors like giving advice (Hill, Sullivan, Knox, & Schlosser, 2007).

In studies in Turkey, Aladag, Yaka, & Koc (2014) investigated the counselor candidates' opinions about their counseling skills training program. Findings indicated that candidates reported anxiety, confusion, excitement, and inadequacy when they thought about themselves as counselors. Another difficulty candidates experienced was controlling their personal reactions.

Were the effects of Practicum I-II courses on trainees' basic counseling skills competencies were investigated, findings indicated that the courses improved basic counseling skills and competencies like reflection of content. Group supervision was found as the most enriching element of this course, and the supervision process was evaluated positively by trainees at undergraduate level (Aladag & Bektas, 2009). Graduate students also evaluated supervision and supervisors positively, and they found their supervisors objective, encouraging, and supportive (Buyukgoze-Kavas, 2011). Similarly, novice therapists searched for feedback and support from supervisors to cope with their FOI (Hill et al., 2007; Thériault et al., 2009).

In conclusion, it can be stated based on the literature that experiencing anxiety and other incompetence feelings is inevitable for trainees during their training, and these experiences impede their professional development (Fulton & Cashwell, 2015). Therefore, the critical task is to enable them to cope with negative feelings and experiences such as anxiety during the training process. In this context, taking into account trainees' experiences and feelings about conducting sessions during the formal education process makes important contributions to their personal and professional development, because when counselor trainees act with awareness and nonjudgmentally toward themselves, their anxiety decreases (Fulton & Cashwell, 2015). Thus, to support the development of counselor trainees and make the educational and training process fully functional, understanding the nature and antecedents of these negative experiences and feelings comes into question. This study was conducted to understand the counselor trainees' predictions about their experiences as a counselor during practicum course and to reveal the sources of the feelings related to these predictions. For this reason, research questions were as follows.

1. What do trainees think about their forthcoming practice of counseling in Practicum Course?
2. What do trainees feel about their forthcoming practice of counseling in Practicum Course?

3. What are the sources of trainees' feelings about their forthcoming practice of counseling in Practicum Course?

Method

Research Design

Since the study aimed to investigate current views of counselor trainees, the descriptive model was utilized. A qualitative study design was used to get a richer understanding of counselor trainees' views on their prospective practicum experiences by means of focus group interviews. These interviews were conducted to make sense of phenomena in terms of meanings attributed by individuals.

Participants

Participants in the study were 13 seniors in the Guidance and Psychological Counseling Program of a public university who took an Individual Counseling Practicum Course. This course is carried out in six groups and each group consists of seven people. This study was conducted with volunteer students from two groups of this course. None of the participants ever conducted a session as a counselor, so they have never received any supervision. Demographic characteristics of the participants with nicknames are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Student Name	Group	Gender	Age	Being a Counselee
Melis	1	Female	21	NO
Zeynep	1	Female	21	YES
Kiraz	1	Female	22	NO
Demet	1	Female	22	YES
Eda	1	Female	22	YES
Inci	1	Female	21	NO
Selda	2	Female	21	YES
Reyhan	2	Female	21	YES
Demir	2	Male	23	NO
Aliye	2	Female	22	YES
Gul	2	Female	21	YES
Gurkan	2	Male	23	NO
Mehmet	2	Male	24	YES

Research Context

The research was conducted about practices within the scope of the Individual Counseling Practicum Course. The aim of this course in the undergraduate program is to make counselor trainees implement counseling skills and competences with a real counselee, to develop students' therapeutic skills and competences, and to prepare them for the profession through the supervision process.

Participants are required to conduct nearly 20-25 sessions with real counsees to be successful in a 14-week course. Students are obliged to transcribe every session they audiotaped, and they are required to make an evaluation of the process and themselves at the end of every session. Supervision is given based on the written transcripts. Feedback was given to students individually and in a written format about whether their reactions are technically correct and appropriate, whether their reactions are functional, and how they manage the process. At the same time, students are supervised each week during a 5-hour course about managing the process by discussing about what they are planning to do in the following session for each counselee through the group supervision. In short, it is aimed that all sessions of counselor trainees are evaluated, their basic psychological counseling skills and competences are assessed and developed and their professional awareness of themselves are increased by means of this course.

Data Collection Procedure

Focus group interviews were conducted to examine and investigate the participants' sources of anxiety and worry about the Individual Counseling Practicum Course before the course began. Since focus group interviews provide an opportunity for interaction between group members, it enables much more detailed and different views compared to individual interviews (Thomas, MacMillan, McColl, Hale, & Bond, 1995).

In order to determine the participants' views about what they would experience as counselors in the Individual Counseling Practicum Course and what they feel about predicted experiences, focus group interviews were conducted in a semi-structured way. The researcher together with two research assistants who had an assisting role in the course conducted the interviews. Participants were informed that the aim of this research focused on their own experiences of this process, and it had nothing to do with evaluation of their performances. After receiving consent from participants, focus group interviews were conducted by asking open-ended questions. Questions were prepared by reviewing the literature and were based on the researcher's previous observations as a supervisor and instructor. Two experts working in counseling and the guidance department who also provided clinical supervision to their students then evaluated and reviewed the questions. According to their suggestions, the last interview protocol, including following questions, was obtained.

1. What do you feel and what do you experience when you consider the counseling process in general with regard to practices and applications in the scope of this course?

2. When you envision yourself carrying out counseling with a real counselee, what do you feel?
3. What makes you feel competent in the counseling process?
4. What do you think about the supervision process to be given in the scope of this course?

The interview with a group of six participants lasted 40 minutes, and the other one with seven participants lasted 55 minutes. Interviews were audiotaped.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed by means of inductive analysis suggested by Creswell (2012). In this context, interviews were transcribed and reviewed for any mistakes. Codes and themes were then determined. At this step, the researcher read transcripts to explore a general sense of data and memos were written on transcripts. After that, microanalysis began; the texts were divided into meaningful segments and then had codes assigned to them. A list of all code words was subsequently obtained. Overlaps and redundancies in raw data were then determined, and the codes were reduced. After this procedure, the data was read and reviewed to see whether new codes emerged. The list of codes was reduced eventually; a thematic framework (6 themes with 47 subthemes) was obtained. To validate the accuracy and credibility of the coding process and the findings in general, the views of three experts (two experts on counseling and one with expertise in qualitative research) were obtained. Through this process, suggestions to unify some subthemes with other subthemes, reorganize some themes under other subthemes, and change some themes' naming were reviewed together with the researcher, and consensus was achieved. Lastly, the themes were reviewed by the researcher, and four themes with 38 subthemes were obtained.

Results

In this section, findings are presented under the heading of themes. As a result of inductive analysis of the data, the four main themes of *Counselor Trainees' Feelings*, *Professional Practice Issues in Counseling Process*, *Evaluation Anxiety*, and *Supervision* were obtained as seen in Figure 1.

1. Counselor Trainees' Feelings

Counselor trainees stated that they felt confused, anxious, excited, curious, and fearful when they imagined or thought about the process they would go through over the course of their practicum. Most of the counselor trainees reported anxiety and fear related to their predictions about what would take place during sessions. Their most frequently stated feeling was anxiety resulting from the unexpectedness of the counseling process in general and their lack of experience. In addition to their overwhelming anxiety and fear, they stated that they experienced excitement when they envisaged working with real clients. One participant reported that she would be curious about her client's feelings, experiences, etc. Another stated that she had not only negative feelings but also positive feelings about her forthcoming counseling sessions.

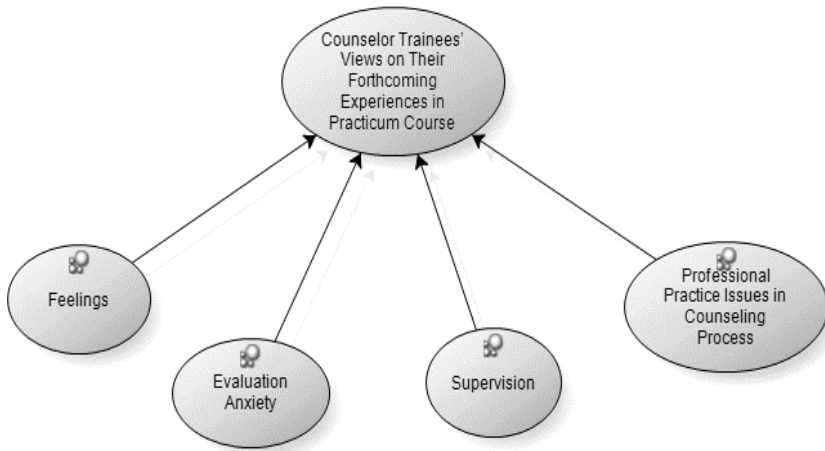


Figure 1. Main themes of the counselor trainees' views on forthcoming experiences in practicum course

2. Professional Practice Issues in Counseling Process

When counselor trainees' expectations of the psychological counseling process were examined, it was determined that the source of their anxieties was issues related to professional practices in the counseling process. As can be seen in Figure 2, findings under this theme were grouped in four main sub-themes of *being professional in counseling process*, *managing counseling process*, *inadequacy in theoretical knowledge and counseling skills*, and *having appropriate personal characteristics*.



Figure 2. Thematic framework of professional practice issues in counseling

2.1. Being Professional in Counseling Process

It was revealed that trainees explained anxieties about being professional in the counseling process in situations of managing difficult emotions, being authentic, and respect issues, as shown in Figure 3.

2.1.1. Managing Difficult Emotions

Since counselor trainees experience very intense feelings, they are anxious that these intense feelings will interfere with the process and they will be unable to control them. Some counselor trainees stated that they would be unable to act professionally when they couldn't control especially their feelings of excitement and anxiety. They experienced anxiety that they would be unable to control all their dysfunctional feelings and thoughts, that they would act unprofessionally by reflecting these feelings and thoughts in the process, and that they would thus transform counseling sessions into daily conversations by feeling sympathy instead of empathy.

2.1.2. Being Authentic

Another characteristic prerequisite for being an effective counselor is authenticity. Counselor trainees were worried about not being genuine or real. They stated that they would like to carry out counseling in their own way, but in the beginning they were afraid of imitating and replicating techniques and statements from books. Some of them stated that they couldn't be natural and acted in a counterfeiting manner because of their excitement. Authenticity is impossible without spontaneity. Although spontaneity goes hand in hand with authenticity, producing both is a little bit difficult. Counselor trainees complained about their ways of giving responses to clients. They stated they would become professional if they could give a response without thinking, i.e., automatically.

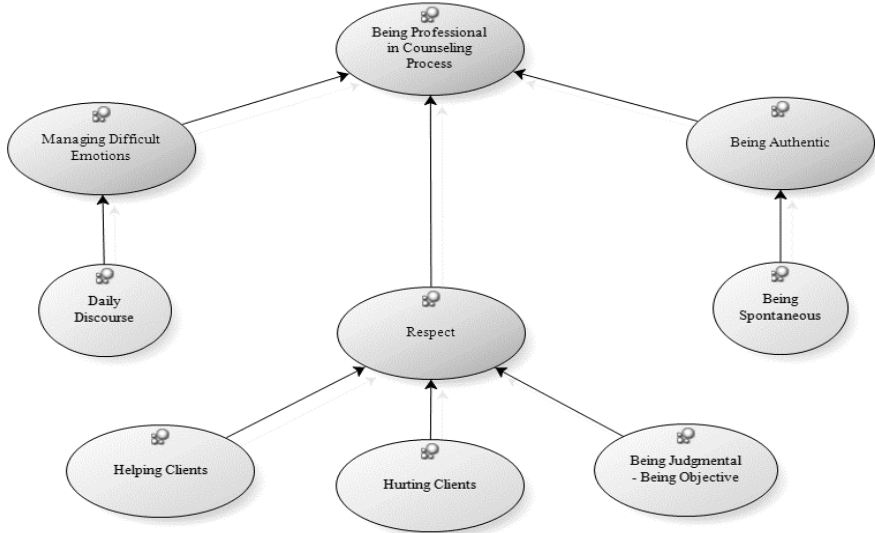


Figure 3. Subthemes of being professional in counseling process

2.1.3. Respect

Counselor trainees expressed their concerns about being judgmental versus objective and helping or hurting clients in the counseling process because of their ineptitude. Since these three issues were found to be related to the subject matter of respect, they were grouped under the heading of respect theme.

Since counselor trainees were aware of the significance of being objective, they stated that they had anxieties about being judgmental or not being objective. Participants mentioned, they were anxious that they would act with their prejudices while conducting sessions, and that even without noticing they might likely impose their own values when they had to work with counselees, especially those who were different from themselves or acted in a way not approved by society. Similarly, they were anxious that they couldn't maintain objectivity when they met with a counselee whom they couldn't tolerate or when they experienced a situation they couldn't handle. That is, they were afraid of not applying the principle of unconditional positive regard to clients different from themselves.

In addition to the objectivity issues, more than half of the participants reported their anxieties about hurting clients. Some of them stated that they could hurt clients directly; on the other hand, some participants mentioned that they could hurt clients indirectly by not being helpful to them. In terms of hurting counselees directly, participants pointed out that they could lead counselees in a way that their problems get worse and could lead counselees to feel worse because of intrusion into their subjective world. With regard to hurting counselees indirectly, participants stated anxiety over being unable to carry out an effective counseling and make an appropriate intervention. For instance, they mentioned that they were anxious about the probability of affecting counselees negatively by means of driving them to despair because of being unable to achieve the goals they set, causing them to waste their time and making them develop negative attitudes toward the counseling process in general.

2.2. Managing Counseling Process

When the sources of counselor trainees' feelings such as anxiety and fear were examined, the trainees perceived managing counseling process as another triggering agent. More specifically, counselor trainees mentioned that they would experience difficulty with issues such as *engaging client in counseling process*, *transferring theoretical knowledge into practice*, *being prepared for counseling*, *integrating supervision into sessions*, and *being engaged*, all of which lead to mismanagement of the counseling process as seen in Figure 4.

2.2.1. Engaging Client in Counseling Process

Counselor trainees were anxious about engaging clients in counseling process. Findings showed that being unable to break the counselee's resistance was one of the challenges counselors faced in engaging clients in counseling process. Counselor trainees explained their anxieties about engaging the client in the counseling process as stemming from the client's resistance due to prejudices against counseling and lack of awareness of the problems needing a solution.

Participants became anxious when they thought that they would have difficulty in establishing a working alliance with counselees and engaging them in the counseling process because of their reluctance and unwillingness. In addition, counselor trainees had anxieties when they predicted they would have difficulty in engaging counselees in the process if they couldn't satisfy their unrealistic expectations such as wanting advice and solutions from trainees. Similarly, they thought that counselees expecting all their problems to be solved with the touch of a magic wand and their lives to be changed all at once in a single session wouldn't participate in the counseling process, and so counselor trainees became anxious about working with the counselees with such unrealistic expectations.

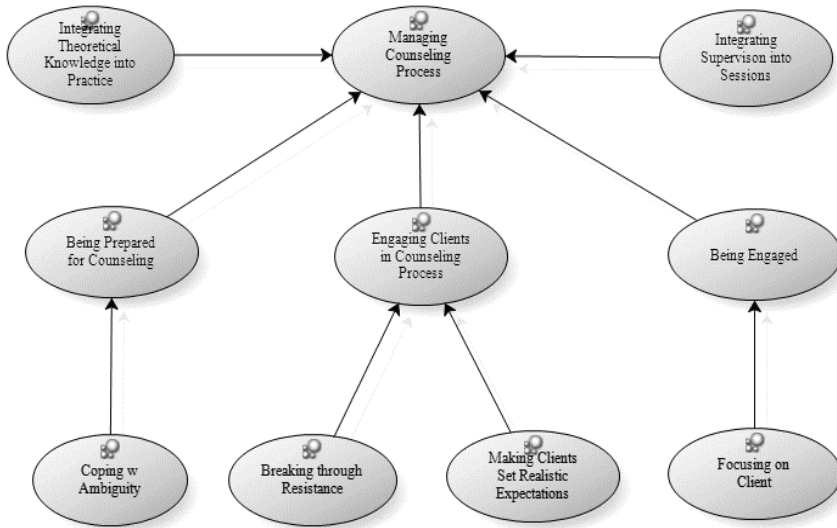


Figure 4. Subthemes of managing counseling process

2.2.2. *Integrating Theoretical Knowledge into Practice*

Most of the beginning counselor trainees stated that they were anxious about transferring theoretical repertoire into practice, because the failure in transfer would lead to mismanagement of the counseling sessions.

2.2.3. *Being Prepared for Counseling*

The fact that counselor trainees feel unprepared for the counseling process and find themselves unexperienced is another factor leading to anxiety because these feelings will prevent effective management of the counseling process. Since the counselor trainees had never conducted any counseling sessions, they didn't know what they would confront during sessions and how they would manage the process, and thus they were anxious. They noted that they would overcome these challenges in time and by experience, but they weren't ready for the process because it would be

their first experience. In addition to their lack of experience, counselor trainees doubted if they could cope with ambiguous nature of the counseling process itself, the unpredictability of what happens during sessions, and variety of clients' problems, so they were worried about managing counseling sessions effectively.

2.2.4. *Being Engaged*

Counselor trainees explained their anxieties related to their performance managing the counseling process by connecting them to issues such as disengagement from the process, being unable to focus on the process, and being unable to focus on the counselee. Trainees experienced intense anxiety over problems related to disengagement from the process due to attention deficit, being lost in thought, remaining unresponsive as a result of not focusing on the process, experiencing silence or misunderstanding the focus, and being unable to listen to the counselee effectively.

2.2.5. *Integrating Supervision into Sessions*

Counselor trainees were anxious about when they would implement the interventions suggested in supervision, how and when they would deal with the issues pointed out by supervisors, and how they would address these issues in the natural flow of the session.

2.3. *Inadequacy in Theoretical Knowledge and Counseling Skills*

Counselor trainees' anxiety over professional practice issues was found to be also related to perceived inadequacies in theoretical knowledge and counseling skills as seen in Figure 5.

2.3.1. *Inadequacy in Theoretical Knowledge*

Nearly all of the participants expressed that they were intensely anxious about their inadequacy in theoretical knowledge, therapeutic skills, and responses. The interviews revealed that counselor trainees' anxieties were related to whether they had the competences they had to acquire in their theoretical courses, as they perceived their practicum as harvest time and they found it difficult to compensate for their previous shortcomings in theoretical and conceptual knowledge.

2.3.2. *Responding Appropriately*

Participants also stated that they were anxious about whether their responses would be appropriate and correct, because they couldn't immediately estimate when and how to give responses compatible with the counselee's disclosures, even though the trainees had the required skills and responses. Because of this indecisiveness, trainees became anxious about the possibilities of being stuck during the process, asking questions ceaselessly, and transforming the process into an interrogation.

2.3.3. *Responding at Deeper Level*

Some participants were afraid that they wouldn't be able to go beyond what counselees say and respond at a lower level, which would lead them to repeat counselees' statements due to their inadequacies.

2.3.4. Responding with Empathy

Being unable to be emphatic, which is closely related to responding at a lower level, was also enumerated among anxiety sources. The participants expressed anxiety over the possibilities of being unable to infer counselees' feeling from what they stated and finding the counselees' problems meaningless and unimportant, as they would think counselees exaggerated their problems. Thus, they were anxious that they would be unable to understand counselees and respond empathetically.

2.4. Having Appropriate Personal Characteristics

In addition to anxieties over their incompetence and inadequacies in theoretical knowledge and therapeutic skills, some counselor trainees were anxious that they might not be compatible with the profession due to their personal or personality characteristics. Two trainees shared their anxieties related to the possibility that they might not be compatible with this profession and might not follow the career in the future. They expressed anxiety that they couldn't imagine themselves as counselors in the future and that they had made the wrong career choice because they thought their personal tendencies and capacities weren't generally compatible with the profession. Based on these characteristics, they pointed out that they had a general anxiety over professional practice issues in the counseling process.

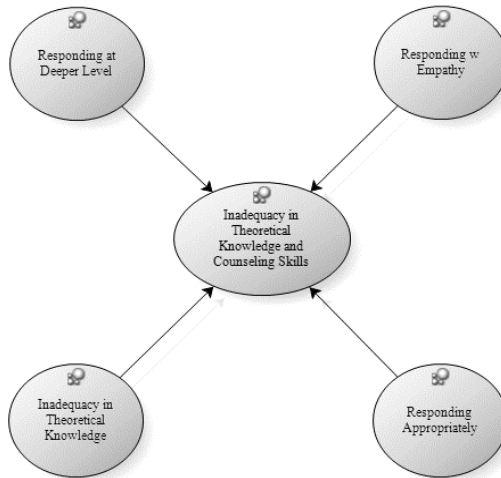


Figure 5. Subthemes of inadequacy in theoretical knowledge and counseling skills

3. Evaluation Anxiety

It was revealed that counselor trainees' anxieties could be related not only to the process itself but also to the evaluation they would experience at the end of or during the process. It was determined that trainees' anxieties were based on being evaluated by counselees and by supervisors with regard to meeting course requirements (Figure 6).

3.1. Evaluation by Counselees

Counselor trainees who refrained from being perceived as incompetent by their counselees expected positive feedback from counselees and to see their counselees benefit from the process. Trainees said that their motivations would be affected when counselees expressed satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

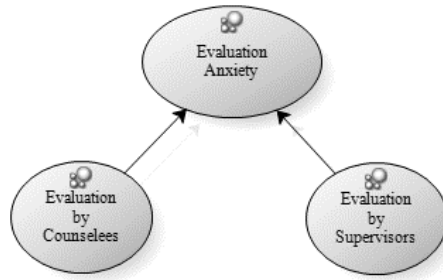


Figure 6. Thematic framework of evaluation anxiety

3.2. Evaluation by Supervisors

Since trainees would undertake these practices in the scope of the course, they tried to meet the requirements of the course and desired positive evaluations from their supervisor. For example, some counselors mentioned that they would fail the course if their counselees dropped out, and they wanted to get high marks from this practicum course with high credits. Furthermore, they were afraid that they could begin to work with a counselee without problems, fall into repetition in the process, and receive negative evaluations from their supervisor because they couldn't work effectively. Additionally, some counselors were anxious about their supervisor's potential negative reactions to them and their practice.

4. Supervision

The supervision process itself might be one of trainees' anxiety sources and is related to evaluation anxiety, but some participants perceived supervision in more positive terms. They defined the supervision process as an answer key that would enable them to see and correct their mistakes and to include alternative responses. Some participants reported progressive characteristics and cumulative effects of supervision process, and they mentioned that their mistakes and incompetence would be reduced as they received supervision over time. Counselor trainees hoped that they would have the opportunity to see and learn more professional responses and interventions by means of the supervision process. A participant described supervision as sharing the responsibilities of the counselee and counseling process, finding the process comforting.

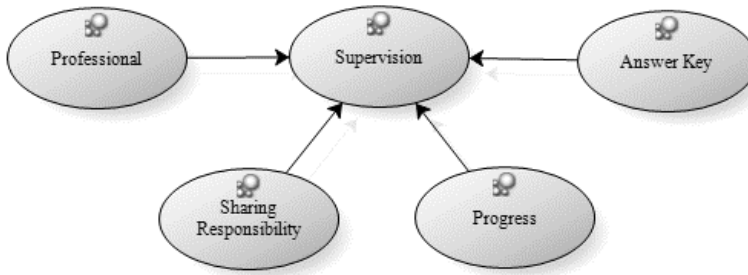


Figure 7. Thematic framework of supervision

Discussion and Conclusion

When counselor trainees' feelings about their imminent practices were examined, it was seen that they had feelings of confusion, anxiety, excitement, curiosity, and fear. Counselor trainees' dominant emotion was anxiety, as expected and consistent with the literature (Aladag et al., 2014; Hill et al., 2007; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003; Thériault & Gazzola, 2005; Thériault et al., 2009; Jennings et al., 2003; Knight, 2013; Woodside et al., 2007). Trainees' anxiety can be explained with the fact that they can't cope with ambiguity of the process because they haven't carried out counseling session before and they are inexperienced. To cope with the ambiguity of the counseling process, they try to determine just one perfect response, in turn making them more anxious (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003). Moreover, counselor trainees have evaluation anxiety (Aladag et al., 2014). Because of continuous self-evaluation as well as evaluation by supervisors, they are preoccupied with themselves, and so they may become more anxious about their competencies.

As counselor trainees' expectations of the process were analyzed, it was observed that their anxieties and fears were centered on Professional Practice Issues in Counseling Process. They were worried about *being professional, managing counseling process, inadequacy in theoretical knowledge and counseling skills, and if they had appropriate characteristics for counseling profession.*

They stated their concerns about being professional as in the form of being authentic, managing difficult emotions, and practicing respect. Authenticity is among the necessary conditions of being an effective counselor, but since trainees are preoccupied with finding the perfect response and being excellent, they are full of anxiety. This anxiety may prevent them from being natural and giving responses spontaneously (Levitt & Jacques, 2005). Because of over-identification with clients, they worry about being sympathetic and feeling more like a friend than a professional (Hill et al., 2007). This finding is consistent with the finding that beginning counselors have anxiety over regulating emotional boundaries with clients (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003), and findings from Aladag et al. (2014) about counselor candidates who indicated the difficulty of controlling their personal reactions.

Counselor trainees expressed their concerns about being professional in terms of respect issues. They are meticulous about showing respect to their clients by means of being objective, helping clients, and not hurting them. One way of expressing respect is being non-judgmental and/or being objective in the counseling process (Brown & Srebalus, 1996). In other words, they are anxious about judging and evaluating their clients from their personal standpoint (Hill et al., 2007).

Counselors show respect to clients through helping them (Egan, 2002), so when counselors worried that they would be unable to help counselees, they concluded that they would hurt their counselees indirectly and that their professionalism would be damaged. This finding is parallel to other findings indicating that counselors were worried about helping clients (Jordan & Kelly, 2004; Thériault & Gazzola, 2005; Woodside et al., 2007). Internalizing and showing respect in counseling process is much more difficult than defining it (Welfel & Patterson, 2005). Therefore, it can be stated that trainees are likely to have anxieties about these respect issues. Counselors need to respect their counselees, to be authentic and spontaneous and also to control their feelings in order to be functional agents in the counseling process. Clearly, participants think that they should take these three issues into consideration, and they become anxious as a result.

One of the stated factors for counselor trainees' anxiety about professional practice issues during counseling process was based on the difficulty of managing counseling process. This is consistent with the finding that indicates *process issues* as one of the most important determinants of therapists' feelings of incompetence. These issues directly relate to the counseling process itself, have long-lasting effects on negative feelings, and are shaped by the interactions between therapist and client. Therefore, incompetence feelings based on *process issues* are difficult to handle (Thériault & Gazzola, 2006). Additionally, each client is unique and his/her problems are various. Thus, the counseling process itself is complex and unpredictable and requires consideration of many things simultaneously (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003), so managing the counseling process requires diverse skills and competencies. Counselor trainees explained their anxieties over difficulties in managing the counseling process by means of *Engaging Client in Counseling Process*, *Integrating Theoretical Knowledge into Practice*, *Being Prepared for Counseling*, *Integrating Supervision into Sessions*, and *Being Engaged*.

Participants reported anxiety about engaging resistant and reluctant clients in counseling process. Especially the clients with negative attitudes about counseling or a lack of self-awareness, or unrealistic expectations from counselors like such as expecting advice were perceived as a source of anxiety. This finding is parallel to some findings in the literature (Hill et al., 2007; Thériault & Gazzola, 2006; Thériault et al., 2009). When the counseling process is defined as a working alliance between counselee and counselor, engaging the counselee in the process and establishing a working alliance with the counselee are seen as the main component of an effective process (Welfel & Patterson, 2005). This situation seems to explain the anxiety of novice counselors, who want to succeed, over engaging their counselees in the process.

Although a working alliance between counselor and counselee is a cornerstone for an effective counseling process (Welfel & Patterson, 2005), integrating theoretical knowledge and concepts into practice is also an indispensable factor in effective practicum (Kottler & Brown, 2000; Woodside et al., 2007). Despite its critical significance, its accomplishment by counselor trainees is initially rather difficult at the beginning because it requires tailoring the general road map presented by theoretical information according to the specific situations in counseling process (Jennings et al., 2003). Thus, since inexperienced trainees are not good at adapting theoretical knowledge into practice spontaneously (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992; 2003), this integration may be perceived as the triggering agent of their anxieties over management of the counseling process.

Feeling unprepared for the counseling process is another source of anxieties over managing the process. This finding is in line with Woodside et al.'s (2007) finding that counselor trainees experience anxiety because they don't know what they will experience in practice, because their expectations of counseling process are unclear, and because they lack experience. Apart from the fact that their practicum is their first experience, novice counselors identified the ambiguity of the counseling process in general as a factor that would lead to difficulty managing the process and as a source of worry and anxiety (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003). As counseling process itself is a multi-dimensional process and its targets are sophisticated individuals, it is quite complicated and full of ambiguities. Therefore, counselor trainees can't predict what will take place during sessions, they feel unprepared, and as a result, they experience fear and anxiety (Woodside et al., 2007). Besides, feelings of fear and anxiety were attributed to the possibility of being distracted from the counseling process and being disengaged from both the process and clients, because being detached from the process means ineffective interventions and decreased performance. Since trainees are then more preoccupied with being good therapists in addition to being effective as counselors, they focus more on themselves. This preoccupation with the self prevents trainees from concentrating on their clients and directing their attention to what is happening in sessions, which results in cognitive distraction (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Counselors' cognitive distraction due to increased self-awareness leads to disengagement and impedes being fully present for clients (Thériault et al., 2009).

Counselor trainees thought that they would have to integrate feedback provided in supervision into their sessions and use this feedback functionally to manage the counseling process effectively. However, they predicted that they would have difficulty in transferring supervision into practice. Although trainees attribute much importance to supervisors' contributions to managing the process and themselves (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003), they may find the spontaneous implementation of supervision into sessions challenging, which leads to anxiety. Since the supervisor's suggestions are based on his/her own style, the high probability that the counselor trainee will be unable to adjust these suggestions to his/her own style may create further anxiety (Cormier & Hackney, 1999). In sum, it was revealed that ineffective management of the counseling process consists of the factors that lead counselors to

lose the feeling of control in the counseling process and factors related to the overall counseling process that indirectly hinder their effectiveness in the process.

Counselor trainees also experience intense anxiety over their inadequacy in theoretical knowledge, therapeutic skills, and responses with regard to professional practices in counseling process. This finding is consistent with Thériault & Gazzola (2006)'s findings. Since counselors are worried about doing the right thing and being effective in general (Thériault & Gazzola, 2005), they want to apply all their accumulated theoretical knowledge into practice (Jennings et al., 2003). Furthermore, it can be stated that counselor trainees who don't realize the role of theoretical knowledge in counseling process aim to pass the course rather than to internalize theoretical and conceptual knowledge. Therefore, the probability of feeling inadequate in terms of theoretical knowledge increases in such a situation. Moreover, trainees weren't confident they could implement therapeutic skills into counseling sessions in an appropriate manner (Thériault & Gazzola, 2006). They were anxious about predicting the right time to respond and being trapped in silence due to their uncertainties about how to respond to their counsees (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003). Additionally, they were concerned about being empathic, which permits counselors to understand their clients' subjective experiences and deeply reflect this understanding to clients (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Thus, since counselor trainees think that their inadequacies in counseling skills and techniques become hindrances to the management and success of the counseling process, they have increased anxiety over the effectiveness of the process and the possibility of achieving success in counseling (Woodside et al., 2007).

Additionally, it was observed that some counselor trainees experienced general anxiety over their incompatibility with the profession due to their personal or personality characteristics. This finding is supported by findings that indicate that counselor trainees are indecisive about whether they have the appropriate personal and personality characteristics to become counselors (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). In particular, counselor trainees faced with difficulties excessively question if they are on the right track, and so they become worried (Woodside et al., 2007).

It was seen that the participants experienced anxiety over evaluation by both their counselee and supervisors with regard not only to managing the process but also during and after the process. Counselor trainees demand to give right responses and be effective in the process (Thériault & Gazzola, 2005), and they decide their effectiveness by taking into account feedback from external sources such as counsees or supervisors (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). When trainees experience performance anxiety, they want to receive approval and be appreciated by counsees to decrease this anxiety. In order to understand if they have been effective or not, counselor trainees look at the indicators of their impacts on counsees, counsees' positive feedback on the process and themselves (Thériault & Gazzola, 2005; Thériault et al., 2009), and whether clients improve or not (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003). Due to the lack of task clarity and difficulty in defining expertise (Skovholt, Ronnestad, & Jennings, 1997), counselor trainees attribute much importance to how they will be evaluated by their supervisors. Since there is no

consensus on the ingredients of effective helping, novices are preoccupied with meeting standards and expectations of this practicum course, and they become anxious about their supervisors' inspections (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003).

Counselor trainees evaluated the supervision process positively. They saw the supervision process as an opportunity for progress and an answer key to see alternative professional responses. They perceived supervision as comforting thanks to sharing responsibility with supervisors. Positive evaluation of the supervision process is consistent with the findings in the literature (Aladag et al., 2009; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003). Trainees seek for support and encouragement from supervisors to decrease their anxiety levels. Also, they need confirmation from supervisors because of the fragile and insecure self (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Furthermore, to be able to manage counseling sessions effectively, trainees try to speed up the professional mastery process through modeling, or imitating their supervisors (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003). Thus, it can be stated that supervision and supervisors are perceived as subsidiary and supportive sources.

As a result, it can be stated that the findings of this study are consistent with earlier findings in the literature. Parallel to studies about professional development of counselors, counselor trainees reported experiencing anxiety, fear, confusion, and excitement. Most of their fears and anxieties were explained through professional practice issues in counseling process such as being professional, having appropriate characteristics for counseling, managing counseling process, and inadequacy in theoretical knowledge and counseling skills. Since counselor trainees are preoccupied with being effective and good counselors, they seek confirmation from clients and supervisors. Thus, evaluation anxiety becomes part of trainees' professional development process. Especially at the beginning of the development process, the supervision process was evaluated positively and as supportive and progressive.

Findings of this study revealed counselor trainees' views on what they would experience and feel about their practicum course before the course started. It was concluded that they became anxious and worried because of the ambiguous nature of counseling. Based on these findings, it is foreseen that addressing the ambiguous and complicated characteristics of the counseling profession and inadequacy feelings which may be experienced by trainees during the counseling process, especially in the scope of their practicum course, will make important contributions to both the training process and professional development of counselor trainees.

Discussing with counselor trainees about their inadequacy feelings in their practicum course and in the supervision process in this scope and allowing them to disclose these feelings will contribute positively to their normalizing and making sense of their experiences during the professional development process. In this context, it is proposed that inadequacy feelings as well as the reasons and sources of these feelings should be taken into consideration during the education and training process to provide a more qualified counselor trainee education and more effective counseling services. Counselor trainees should be provided with support for coping with ambiguities in the process.

Although this study puts forward important findings about counselor trainees, it has some limitations. This study was conducted as a qualitative study with a limited number of participants. Therefore, similar studies could be conducted with larger groups. To benefit from group synergy in the process of data collection, focus group interviews were used. Therefore, methods such as observation and diary use can be implemented in data collection for data triangulation. In this study, data was gathered only before the practices in the course began. Data can be collected during sessions and also at the end of the process in order to understand and observe the trend in inadequacy feelings over a developmental process. For a deep understanding of the feelings and thoughts counselor trainees experience in their professional developmental process, longitudinal studies that include pre-professional and professional life can be conducted.

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Psikolojik Danışman Adaylarının Bireyle Psikolojik Danışma Uygulaması Dersindeki Olası Yaşantılarına İlişkin Görüşleri

Atf:

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Özet

Problem Durumu: Bir yardım mesleği olan psikolojik danışma alanında psikolojik danışman adaylarının gerekli bilgi ve becerilerle donatılması ve danışman kimliğinin kazandırılması için özel eğitim alması ve uygulama yapması gerekmektedir. Çünkü

psikolojik danışma mesleğinin hedefi psikolojik yardıma ihtiyaç duyan bireylerdir. Psikolojik danışma sürecinin etkililiği kullanılan yöntem ve tekniklerden daha çok danışmanın kişisel ve kişilik özelliklerine dayanmaktadır. Bu nedenle, psikolojik danışma eğitimi oldukça önemlidir. Ayrıca, etkili psikolojik danışma gerçekleştirebilme aynı anda danışanın konuşmalarını, düşüncelerini ve davranışları gibi pek çok faktörü dikkate almayı gerektirmektedir. Danışmanların danışanın sunduğu tüm bilgilere dayanarak danışanın problemleri ve meseleleri ile ilgili hipotez kurmaları ve bu hipotezleri danışma sürecinde test etmeleri de beklenmektedir. Bir başka deyişle, analitik, spontan, ve empatik olma etkili psikolojik danışman olmanın ön koşullarıdır. Bu özellikler bilgi düzeyinde derslerde kazanılsa da, danışman adaylarının bu kuramsal kazanımlarını uygulamaya geçirmeleri gerekmekte, bilgi ve beceri aktarımı da ancak uygulama dersi ile mümkün olmaktadır. Uygulama dersi bu kazanımların uygulamaya aktarılmasını sağlasa da danışman adaylarında bazı olumsuz düşünce ve duygulara yol açmaktadır çünkü uygulama dersi hemen hemen tüm psikolojik danışman adayları için psikolojik danışma uygulamalarının başlangıç noktasını oluşturmaktadır. Danışman adayları uygulama dersini üniversite eğitimleri boyunca edindikleri kazanımları ve repertuarlarını ortaya koyacakları bir sahne gibi düşünmekte, kaygı ve korku başta olmak üzere yetersizlik duyguları yaşamaktadırlar. Bu yetersizlik duyguları ise danışman adaylarının mesleki gelişimlerine ket vurmaktadır. Bu nedenle, uygulama eğitimi süresi boyunca yaşanan kaygı gibi olumsuz duygularla baş etmeyi sağlamak danışman eğitiminin ayrılmaz bir parçasıdır. Bu bağlamda, danışman adaylarının eğitimleri süresince gerçekleştirdikleri oturumlarla ilgili ortaya çıkan duygu ve yaşantılarının ele alınması danışman adaylarının kişisel ve mesleki gelişimlerine önemli katkılar sağlayacaktır.

Araştırmanın Amacı: Danışman adaylarının gelişim süreçlerini desteklemek ve eğitim sürecinin daha işlevsel olması için danışman adaylarının uygulama dersi kapsamında gerçekleştirecekleri oturumlar ve ders sürecine ilişkin olumsuz yaşantı ve duygularının araştırılması hedeflenmiştir. Bu amaçla, bu çalışmada danışman adaylarının uygulama dersinde danışman olarak yaşayacakları olası deneyimlere ilişkin görüşleri ve bu görüşlere ilişkin olarak ortaya çıkan duygularının kaynaklarının ortaya konması amaçlanmıştır.

Araştırmanın Yöntemi: Bu çalışma, danışman adaylarının uygulama dersindeki olası yaşantılarına ilişkin görüşlerini daha iyi ve ayrıntılı olarak anlamak için nitel çalışma olarak gerçekleştirilmiştir. Veriler, veri zenginliği sağlamak, grup sinerjisinden yararlanmak amacıyla odak grup görüşmeleri ile toplanmıştır. Araştırmanın katılımcıları bir devlet üniversitesinin Rehberlik ve Psikolojik Danışmanlık Programı'nın dördüncü sınıfında Bireyle Psikolojik Danışma Uygulaması dersini alan 13 öğrenciden oluşmaktadır. Bu ders 7 kişilik gruplar halinde 6 grup olarak yürütülmektedir. Bu çalışma, bu dersin iki grubuna devam eden ve çalışmaya gönüllü olarak katılmak isteyen öğrencilerle gerçekleştirilmiştir. Açık uçlu sorular sorularak yapılandırılmış olarak gerçekleştirilen görüşmeler 6 kişilik grupta yaklaşık 40 dakika, 7 kişilik grupta ise yaklaşık 55 dakika sürmüştür. Verilerin analizi tümevarım analizi yoluyla gerçekleştirilmiştir.

Araştırmanın Bulguları: Verilerin tümevarımsal analizi sonucunda *Danışman Adaylarının Duyguları, Psikolojik Danışma Sürecinde Mesleki Uygulamalar, Değerlendirilme Kaygısı ve Süpervizyon* olmak üzere dört ana temaya ulaşılmıştır. Danışman adaylarının ders kapsamında gerçekleştirecekleri süreci hayal ettiklerinde, ya da düşündüklerinde kaygı, korku, heyecan, merak hissettiklerini ve kafalarının karışık olduğunu belirtmişlerdir. En sık ifade edilen kaygının kaynakları psikolojik danışma sürecinin genel olarak belirsizliği ve deneyim eksikliği ile açıklanmıştır. Danışman adaylarının psikolojik danışma sürecine ilişkin beklentileri incelendiğinde, onların kaygılarının kaynağında danışma sürecindeki mesleki uygulamalarla ilgili olan *danışma sürecinde profesyonel olabilmek, danışma sürecini yönetme, teorik bilgi ve danışma becerilerinde yetersizlik, kişisel açıdan mesleğe uygun olma* gibi faktörlerin yer aldığı belirlenmiştir. Danışman adaylarının kaygılarının sürecin sadece kendisi ile değil aynı zamanda sürecin sonunda ya da süreç sırasında yaşayacakları değerlendirilme kaygısı ile de ilgili olabileceği görülmüştür. Danışman adaylarının değerlendirilme kaygılarının temelinde, danışanlar tarafından değerlendirilme ve süpervizör tarafından dersin gerekliliklerini karşılama açısından değerlendirilme meselelerinin olduğu belirlenmiştir. Değerlendirilme kaygısı ile ilgili olabilecek ve danışman adaylarının kaygı kaynaklarından birisi de süpervizyon sürecinin kendisi olabilmektedir. Katılımcılar süpervizyon sürecini yanlışlarını görmelerini ve düzeltmelerini sağlayacak, içinde alternatif tepkilerin yer aldığı bir cevap anahtarı gibi tanımlamışlardır. Bazı katılımcılar da süpervizyon sürecinin birikimli etkisinin geliştiriciliğinden, süpervizyon aldıkça zamanla hata ve eksikliklerinin azalacağından söz etmişlerdir. Süpervizyon süreci ile daha profesyonel tepkiler ve müdahaleleri görebilmek ve öğrenebilmek fırsatı yakalayacaklarını ummaktadırlar. Süpervizyon sürecini danışan ve danışma sürecinin sorumluluğunu paylaşma olarak algılayan bir katılımcı ise bu süreci rahatlatıcı bulmaktadır.

Araştırmanın Sonuçları ve Önerileri: Bu çalışmanın bulguları danışman adaylarının eğitimleri sırasında uygulama dersi öncesinde bu dersle ilgili neler yaşayacaklarına ve neler hissettiklerine ilişkin görüşlerini ortaya koymuş, bilinmezliklerle dolu olan bu yaşantı nedeniyle kaygı ve endişe yaşadıkları sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. Bu bulgulara dayalı olarak eğitimleri boyunca özellikle de uygulama dersi kapsamında danışman adayları ile psikolojik danışma mesleğinin belirsiz ve karmaşık yönleri, süreçte yaşanabilecek yetersizlik duygularının ele alınmasının hem eğitim sürecine hem de danışman adaylarının mesleki gelişimine önemli katkılar sağlayacağı ön görülmektedir.

Danışman adaylarının mesleki gelişim sürecinde yaşadıklarını normalleştirilmesi ve anlamlandırmasına katkı sağlamak için yetersizlik duygularının uygulama dersinde ve bu kapsamdaki süpervizyon sürecinde onlarla tartışılması, bu duygularını ifade etmelerine izin verilmesi mesleki gelişim süreçlerine olumlu katkılar sağlayacaktır. Bu bağlamda, daha kaliteli danışman adayları eğitimi ve daha etkili psikolojik danışma hizmetlerinin sağlanması için yetersizlik duyguları ve bu duyguların neden ve kaynaklarının eğitim süresince dikkatle ele alınması önerilebilir. Danışman adaylarına süreçteki belirsizliklerle baş etme konusunda destek sağlanabilir.

Bu çalışma danışman adayları konusunda önemli bulgular ortaya koysa da bazı sınırlılıklara sahiptir. Bu araştırma nitel çalışma olarak, az sayıda katılımcı ile gerçekleştirilmiştir. Bu nedenle daha büyük gruplarla benzer çalışmalar gerçekleştirilebilir. Veri toplama sürecinde grup sinerjisinden yararlanmak için odak grup görüşmesinden yararlanılmıştır. Bu nedenle sonraki çalışmalarda gözlem, günlük gibi yöntemlerle veri çeşitlemesi yapılabilir. Bu çalışmada derste uygulanan uygulamalar başlamadan önce veri toplanmıştır. Danışman adaylarının yetersizlik duygularının gelişimsel süreçte nasıl bir seyir izlediğini anlamak için, danışman adayları ile hem danışma oturumları devam ederken, hem de süreç sonunda da veri toplanabilir. Danışman adaylarının gelişimsel süreçlerinde yaşadığı duyguları ve durumları daha derinlemesine anlamak için meslek öncesi ve mesleki hayatını da kapsayan boylamsal çalışmalar gerçekleştirilebilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Danışman adayları, danışmanların profesyonel gelişimi, danışman adaylarının kaygısı, danışman adaylarının yetersizlik duygusu