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Impact of a Counseling Ethics Course on Graduate Students' Learning and Development

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Keywords

Counselor education and development, Ego development, Ethical and legal knowledge, Scholarship of teaching and learning

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Abstract

Data from graduate counseling students ($N = 28$) enrolled in an ethical and legal issues in professional school counseling course at a research university were used to investigate the impact of the course on students' levels of ethical and legal knowledge (Lambie, Hagedorn, & Ieva, 2010) and ego development (Loevinger, 1976, 1998). Students' ethical and legal knowledge scores increased significantly and pre-course ego maturity correlated with post-course ethical and legal knowledge. Implications for the scholarship of teaching and learning are discussed.

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Introduction

Training in ethical practice is an integral component for school counselors-in-training. For example, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2009) identifies professional orientation and ethical practice as one of the eight core curricular experiences to be included in counselor preparation programs. In addition, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2007) competencies state that school counselors must demonstrate "ethical and professional competencies in planning, organizing, implementing, and evaluating a comprehensive school counseling program" (p. 2). The application of ethical knowledge correlates to counselors' level of cognitive development (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999). Moreover, counselors' ethical reasoning relates to their level of cognitive development in that higher developmental levels increased their ability to analyze complex and fluctuating ethical dilemmas (Dufrene, 2000). Graduate students "levels of ego development mark important distinctions in the ways, and degrees of complexity with which individuals understand the self, others, and social situations" (Bauer & McAdams, 2004, p. 115). As students mature in their ego development, they become increasingly flexible and adaptive to their environment and interpersonal interactions (Cook-Greiter & Soulen, 2007). Therefore, students' ethical application of counseling services theoretically correlates with their levels of ethical and

legal knowledge and social-cognitive development. Nevertheless, investigation of effective pedagogy to promote students' learning and application of ethical and legal knowledge (social-cognitive development) is limited.

Historically, the delivery of ethics instruction to counseling graduate students focused on reviewing ethical codes of practice (e.g., American Counseling Association [ACA], 2005) and the application of these best practices to general counseling populations (Welfel, 2009). However, integrating ethical decision-making models, legal cases and precedents, and models of principle ethics were identified as the three highest ranked models for teaching ethics in counselor preparation programs (Hill, 2004). Nevertheless, there is a paucity of research examining pedagogy that supports graduate students' learning of ethical and legal knowledge (Kitchener, 1998) and social-cognitive development. Therefore, a time-series investigation of graduate students' learning of ethical and legal knowledge and ego maturity related to a specific counseling ethics course addresses a void in the literature, and aligns with the practice of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL; Gurung, Ansburg, Alexander, Lawrence, & Johnson, 2008; Hutchings, Huber, & Ciccone, 2011).

Ego Development and Ethical and Legal Knowledge

Scholars note the importance of ethical and legal knowledge and ego development, at both the training and practice levels for school counselors. We described these two constructs to set an accurate context for the SoTL study that follows.

Ethical and Legal Knowledge
Effective counselors possess sound ethical (best practices for a profession) and legal (minimal acceptable practice tolerated by society) knowledge and have the ability to integrate a code of ethics with students in various school settings (Kocet, 2006). School counselors' professional identity is also positively related to their ethical and legal knowledge and ethical practice (Stone, 2009). In addition, higher levels of formal education (content knowledge) correlate with higher moral reasoning (ethical decision-making; Sias, Lambie, & Foster, 2006). Furthermore, the acquisition and application of ethical and legal knowledge primarily occurs in graduate counseling students' preparation programs. As part of counselor preparation, CACREP (2009) requires all students to demonstrate a mastery of the ethical standards of their professional organizations and credentialing bodies, as well as the skills necessary to implement ethical and legal practices in their work with clients (*Standard, II.G.1.j.*).

We reviewed the counseling ethical and legal literature (e.g., Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2007; Cottone & Tarvydas, 2007; Remley & Herlihy, 2009; Stone, 2009; Welfel, 2009) and the ethical codes (e.g., ACA, 2005; ASCA, 2010), and identified common concepts regarding the necessary knowledge counselors require in order to provide ethical services. Examples of ethical and legal concepts consistent in the counseling literature include *slander*, *defamation*, *negligence*, *in loco parentis*, *informed consent*, *privileged communication*, and *confidentiality*. To support students' ethical and legal knowledge development, graduate education programs may infuse ethical and legal counseling content throughout their curriculum and/or require a specific course in ethical and legal issues in counseling (Hill, 2004). Nevertheless, students must demonstrate a level of competency regarding their ethical and legal knowledge (ACA, 2005; CACREP, 2009; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, NCATE, 2008), supporting the ethical delivery of counseling services.

Graduate education programs use various methods to disseminate ethical and legal information to their students. One common method is through the use of textbooks that supplement school counseling students' course content (e.g., Corey et al., 2007; Cottone & Tarvydas, 2007; Stone, 2009). To support students' ethical knowledge development, instructors may employ multiple educational strategies in their counseling ethics courses, such as lecture, group discussions, and reviewing and processing counseling case studies and ethical dilemmas (Vanek, 1990). It stands to reason that an effective approach to foster students' ethical and legal knowledge-base is through multiple educational strategies (e.g., role-plays, application of ethical decision-making models, and comparing and contrasting ethical codes with specific laws), matching students' different learning styles (e.g., auditory, visual, kinesthetic, reflecting, acting, reasoning logically, reasoning intuitively, and analyzing; Felder & Brent, 2005).

Ego Development
Ego development (Loevinger, 1976, 1998) draws from other stage theories of human development (e.g., Kohlberg, 1981; Piaget, 1955). In Loevinger's developmental theory, the ego is a holistic and comprehensive personality construct which incorporates cognitive, moral, self, interpersonal, and character development (Lambie, 2007; Manner & Durkin, 2002). Noam, Young, and Jilnina (2006) noted that the ego is the conceptual framework in which individuals make meaning of their experiences and emotions. The ego develops towards progressively more complex levels of meaning-making, impulse control, interpersonal relations, and intrapersonal congruence (Cohn & Westenberg, 2004).

Ego development theory delineates eight distinct ego levels that are equilibrated structures which develop in a hierarchical sequence, progressing to increased personal and interpersonal awareness, autonomy, an ability to think complexly, and an enhanced capacity to self-regulate (Manner, Durkin, & Nesdale, 2004). At lower levels of ego development, students' meaning-making is simplistic and undifferentiated; while at more mature levels, they are better able to recognize incongruence and conflict, interdependency and mutuality, and systemic influences on their lives. Additionally, researchers have investigated the relationship between graduate students' levels of ego development (Loevinger, 1976, 1998) and other desirable counseling constructs, such as students' (a) acquisition of counseling skills and abilities (Borders & Fong, 1989); (b) expressed levels of empathy with clients (McIntyre, 1985); (c) perceptions of clients, in-session behaviors with clients, and counselor effectiveness (Zinn, 1995); (d) abilities to cope with stress during internship experiences (Walter, 2009); (e) levels of wellness (Lambie, Smith, & Ieva, 2009); and (f) ability to develop accepting and close relationships with persons with disabilities (Sheaffer, Sias, Toriello, & Cubero, 2008).

Ego development theory (Loevinger, 1976, 1998) is an equilibration model in which students' growth relates to their adaptive responses (accommodation) and their interactions with the environment. When students are confronted with experiences or "information that does not fit their existing schema for the self or the surrounding world, it precipitates what has been variously termed dissonance, cognitive conflict, or disequilibrium" (Manner & Durkin, 2000, p. 478). In order to restore equilibrium, students either adapt to their environment by assimilating the new information into their current schema (resulting in developmental stability), or they alter their schema to the new information (resulting in developmental growth; Lambie & Sias, 2009). Within a counseling ethics course, the intentional introduction and discussion of complex ethical dilemmas (e.g., how a school counselor negotiates between a student's right to confidentiality and his or her parents' right to know what their son or daughter is talking to the counselor about) may induce disequilibrium, resulting in an assimilative and/or accommodative response.

In addition, the psychometric soundness of Loevinger's theory and the empirical support for her assessment instrument, the *Washington University Sentence Completion Test* (WUSCT; Hy & Loevinger, 1996), make this theory an appropriate foundation for understanding the social-cognitive development of graduate students (Lambie & Sias, 2009; Lilienfeld, Wood, & Garb, 2000). Therefore, we hypothesize that counseling students' levels of ego maturity will correlate to their ability to acquire new knowledge and make sound ethical decisions in their practice.

Purpose of the Study
Given the significance of ethical and legal knowledge in counselors' practice, and the relationship between ego maturity and desirable counselor qualities (e.g., counseling skills, level of empathy with clients, counselor wellness; Border & Fong, 1989; McIntyre, 1985; Lambie et al., 2009), we examined the impact of a school counseling ethics courses on students' levels of knowledge and development in an effort to identify potential implications for supporting the effectiveness of future counseling professionals and SoTL. The two research questions investigated were: (a) What is the impact of a school counseling ethics course on students' levels of ethical and legal knowledge and ego development? (b) What is the relationship between counseling students' ethical and legal knowledge and ego development scores and their reported demographics (e.g., age, gender, coupling relationship, prior ethics training, and undergraduate grade point averages)?

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Method

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Procedures and Participants
The sample included 28 masters-level school counseling students at a large metropolitan research university in the southeastern United States. We obtained approval from the university's Institutional Board Review to conduct the study. To protect the rights and confidentiality of the students, participation was voluntary, students' names and identifying information were not collected, and none of the data collected was reviewed or scored until after the course was completed and grades had been submitted. We introduced the study and provided informed consent to potential participants (using a waiver of documentation of consent to participate in research), and then administered the data collection instrument packets both during the first and final class meetings of a school counseling ethics courses that met over a 13-week period. More specifically, during the first class meeting, we distributed envelopes containing a waiver to documentation of consent to participate in research form and the three data collection instruments to participants who were asked to write down the number of their envelope (e.g., #1A) somewhere in their personal effects. During the final class meeting, participants collected the envelope (which contained the same informed consent and data collection instruments) that corresponded to the number they wrote down from the first class meeting (e.g., #1A retrieved #1B). Therefore, if participants chose not to partake in the study, they could simply leave the data collection instruments blank and we would have been unable to identify them. Nevertheless, all the students chose to complete the data collections instruments (which resulted in a 100% usable response rate).

Professional School Counseling Ethics Course (Intervention)
The student-participants were enrolled in a 13-week school counseling ethics course within a CACREP and NCATE accredited school counseling program (13 class meetings that were three hours and fifty minutes long). The content of the course was designed to cover the primary school counseling ethical and legal issues, such as (a) professional identity and

competencies; (b) ethical decision-making models; (c) confidentiality and privileged communication; (d) suicide and student violence; (e) abuse, neglect, and negligence; (f) counseling and educational records; (g) educational and civil right laws; (h) counselor wellness and impairment; and (i) discrimination laws and ethics. In addition, all the course objectives were aligned with the appropriate CACREP (2009) *Standards* and ASCA (2007) *School Counselor Competencies*. For example, course objectives indicated that students would be able to demonstrate (a) knowledge and comprehension of issues and practice relating to the roles and duties of school counselors; (b) knowledge and comprehension of the ASCA (2004) *Ethical Standards* and ACA (2005) *Code of Ethics*; (c) the ability to apply sound ethical decision-making processes within their school counseling practices; and (d) the ability to apply, analyze, syntheses, and evaluate ethical decision-making processes as they work through ethical dilemmas confronting school counselors, resulting in sound and defendable practice (Bloom, 1974)

Pedagogically, the instructor for the ethical and legal issues in school counseling course employed multiple educational strategies to support students' learning and development. Specific teaching strategies included (a) course readings, (b) lectures, (c) group discussions, and (d) role-plays to support the students' learning and development. Additionally, the students facilitated a group presentation to their classmates on a specific ethical issue confronting school counselors; identifying research, ethical codes of practice, legal statutes, and school board policy that influenced counselors' decision-making when experiencing a similar ethical dilemma (student as teacher). Moreover, the instructor employed scaffolding to support the students' learning and developmental growth. Scaffolding educational content (a) provides clear and concrete directions, reducing students' confusion; (b) clarifies purpose; (c) keeps students on task; (d) clarifies expectations and incorporates assessment and feedback; (e) directs students to worthy sources; and (f) reduces students' level of uncertainty (McKenzie, 1999). For example, the instructor introduced the concept of confidentiality to his students, providing them with a concrete understanding of the ethical principle. Next, the instructor facilitated a discussion concerning confidentiality and school counselors, clarifying the students' understanding of confidentiality with practical case illustrations (e.g., parent wants counselor to break confidentiality and share what student expressed to counselor). After the discussion, students were provided different ethical dilemmas confronting school counselors and they had to apply, analyze, syntheses, and evaluate the different ethical decision-making processes they work employ.

Student outcomes were evaluated through both formative and summative assessments. Students had required readings from three ethical and legal issues in counseling textbooks and the instructor used formative assessments of students' learning of course content through weekly quizzes on the assigned readings. Further, students completed a summative assessment where students systemically worked through an ethical decision-making process. Specifically, the instructor required students to research an ethical and legal dilemma confronting school counselors (e.g., suicidal ideation, distributing prescription drugs, parents or guardians challenging confidentiality). Following the identification of the dilemma, students constructed a case illustrating the ethical and legal dilemma and presented how they would ethically work through the dilemma using professional ethical guidelines and legal statues (federal, state, case). To further students' development, the instructor required the students to develop an ethical dilemma related to confidentiality and a school counselor, encouraging the students to identify their own solution and process for working through the dilemma. Consequentially, the instructor constructed the ethics course to promote both the students' learning of significant ethical knowledge and their developmental growth.

Instruments
We investigated the impact of a counseling ethics course on graduate students' level of (a) ethical and legal knowledge (*Ethical and Legal Issues in Counseling Questionnaire*, ELICQ; Authors, 2010), and (b) ego development (*Washington University Sentence Completion Test,* WUSCT; Hy & Loevinger, 1996). The variables used to examine the students' learning and development included Total Ethical and Legal Knowledge (pre- and post-test) and Overall Ego Development (pre- and post-test) scores.

Ethical and Legal Issues in Counseling Questionnaire (ELICQ)
The ELICQ (Lambie et al., 2010) is a 50-item multiple choice instrument designed to measure counselors' ethical and legal knowledge. The ELICQ is comprised of 10 subscales: (a) professional identity; (b) ethical and legal terms; (c) ethical decision-making principles; (d) confidentiality; (e) suicide and client violence; (f) abuse, neglect, and negligence; (g) counseling and educational records, (h) educational and civil right laws, (i) counselor development and wellness; and (j) discrimination laws and ethics.

The ELICQ was developed per the suggested eight steps for scale construction (DeVellis, 2003). The ELICQ was grounded in an extensive literature review of counseling ethics and laws (e.g., Corey et al., 2007; Cottone & Tarvydas, 2006; Cottone & Tarvydas, 2007; Remley & Herlihy, 2009; Stone, 2005; Welfel, 2009). To assess the content validity of the instruments, 10 experts (counselor educators who have taught counseling ethics courses employed at different universities throughout the United States whom were accessible and willing to review the test items) examined the ELICQ to determine if the content (items) appeared to measure counselors' ethical and legal knowledge (DeVellis, 2003). The outside reviewers provided feedback concerning the ELICQ test items such (e.g., questions that needed to be reworded, deleted, and added to the instrument). The reliability of the ELICQ with these data was acceptable, but moderate with an overall alpha coefficient score of .703 (Cohen, 1988). Additionally, the reliability of the ELICQ with 226 practicing school counselors was acceptable with an overall Cronbach reliability score of .712 (Lambie, Ieva, Mullen, & Hayes, 2011).

The ELICQ (Lambie et al., 2010) includes 50 items that were developed following Kline's (2005) nine rules to guide the development of sound scale items (e.g., deal with only one primary concept per item, items should be brief and precise, write items in positive language). Examples of questions from the ELICQ include:

1. When a professional counselor is gossiping about a client's behavior in a social gathering, this may be considered: (a) Malpractice, (b) Defamation, (c) Abandonment, or (d) Loco parentis.
2. Access to a client's educational records must be in accordance with: (a) The *Family Educational Rights & Practice Act of 1974*, (b) The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, (c) The *Education for All Handicap Children Act of 1975*, or (d) the *Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996.*

The Washington University Sentence Completion Test (WUSCT)
The WUSCT is a semi-projective inventory consisting of 18 or 36 sentence stems with different forms for men and women relating to Loevinger's (1998) eight levels of ego development. The two WUSCT forms differ only in gender specific language such as "A man should always…" (Male) and "A woman should always…" (Female). We used the short-forms of the WUSCT (81-1; Hy & Loevinger, 1996) (18 sentence stems) for this study. In scoring the WUSCT, each sentence stem response is rated as a whole by its level of meaning, or what the person is saying, and is not conceptualized in relation to the other 17 responses. A

total protocol rating (TPR) is then calculated using an algorithm reflecting the respondent's assessed place on Loevinger's ego development scheme, which consist of the following eight levels: *Impulsive* (E2) – student functions based on physical needs and impulses, while being dependent on others for control; *Self-Protective* (E3) – student is opportunistic and adheres to traditions and rituals; *Conformist* (E4) – student accepts rules just because they are rules, and strives for social acceptance; *Self-Aware* (E5) – student has increased self-awareness and reflectivity, beginning to recognize multiple perspectives; *Conscientious* (E6) – student becomes self-evaluative and reflective, while recognizing multiple possibilities and a sense of choice, and thinks beyond own concerns; *Individualistic* (E7) – student has sense of individuality and greater tolerance of difference, while having increased awareness of own incongruence; *Autonomous* (E8) – student has deep respect for others' choices and need for autonomy with a high tolerance for ambiguity; and *Integrated* (E9)– student has become congruent and self-actualized—few people ever reach this level (Hy & Loevinger, 1996; Lambie, 2007). Scoring the WUSCT may be completed by an individual with "reasonable intelligence" (p. 32) who completes the written scoring exercises found in the test manual (Hy & Loevinger, 1996). The WUSCT differs from other semi-projective test manuals because the written instructions and training exercises for raters supports high interrater reliability in a short period of time (Loevinger, 1998). For the current study, the two scoring raters (the first and second authors) completed the training in scoring the WUSCT and achieved a high interrater reliability of .93 on a sample of 25 completed test protocols.

The WUSCT (Hy & Loevinger, 1996) is a reliable and valid measure of ego development; extensive research using the WUSCT as a measure of ego development offers substantial confirmation of its strength as a psychometric assessment of social-cognitive development (e.g., Cook-Greiter & Soulen, 2007; Lilienfeld et al., 2000; Manner & Durkin, 2001; Noam et al., 2006). For example, Lilienfeld and colleagues (2000) concluded that the WUSCT "has demonstrated impressive construct validity…" and "is arguably the most extensively validated projective technique" (p. 56). In addition, the median interrater of the WUSCT is between .89 and .92 (Watts, Robinson, & Lupton-Smith, 2002). Furthermore, WUSCT has been found to be a robust and reliable measure of ego development across alternative instruction formats (Blumentritt, Novy, Gaa, & Liberman, 1996).

Data Analysis
We used a time-series design for this research as the primary variables were manipulated (intervention – counseling ethics course), without random assignment of the participants or a comparison group. Houser (2009) suggested that in a time-series design, the researcher is investigating changes that occurred between initial assessments and following an intervention or interruption. However, the findings from a time-series research design need to be interpreted with caution because of threats to validity (e.g., something other than the intervention may have contributed to the change; Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan, 2008).

After the data collection process, we scored the data and entered it into a database and analyzed by Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, 2006) using a repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Pearson product-moment correlations (two-tailed). Prior to the data analyses, we examined the data set to assess the fit between the distribution of the variables and the assumptions of the statistical analysis, such as normality, homogeneity of variance, and multicollinearity; no assumption violations were identified. A sample size of 28 was acceptable for identifying a large effect size (power = .80) at the .05 level (Cohen, 1992).

Results

Participant Characteristics

Descriptive data and measures of central tendency indicated that the mean age of the 28 students was 28.00 years (*SD* = 7.77; range 21-55 years). Men were less represented than women: there were four men (14.3%) compared with twenty-four women (85.7%). Students were asked to self-identify their ethnicity or race as Caucasian (*n* = 27, 96.4%) or "Other" (*n* = 1, 3.6%; e.g., African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Latino American, Native American). Regarding coupling status, 18 (64.3%) students identified as single, nine (32.1%) students identified as married, and one (3.6%) student identified as cohabitating. Additionally, four (14.3%) of the students identified that they had completed an ethics and legal issues course or workshop prior to beginning this *Ethical and Legal Issues in Professional School Counseling* course. Furthermore, the students reported their undergraduate grade point averages (GPAs) ranged from a 2.50 to 3.97 (*M* = 3.45, *SD* = .34).

Ethical and Legal Knowledge

We used the ELICQ (Lambie et al., 2010) to obtain the participants' scores of ethical and legal knowledge. The pre-test and post-test ELICQ scores are presented in Table 1. The ELICQ scores did not have a statistically significant relationship to the students' age, gender, coupling status, or prior ethics training for these data. However, a positive, significant relationship was identified between the post-test ELICQ scores and the students' reported undergraduate GPA (r = .439, p = .02; 19.3% of the variance).

Ego Development

We used the WUSCT (Hy & Loevinger, 1996) Form-81 (short-forms; 18 sentence stems for pre-test and 18 different sentence stems for the post-test) to obtain students' ego development scores. The pre-test ego levels of the students (*N* = 28) were as follows: Conformist (E4; *n* = 3, or 10.7%), Self-aware (E5; *n* = 13, or 46.4%), Conscientious (E6; *n* = 11, or 39.3%), Individualistic (E7; *n* = 1, or 3.6%). The post-test ego levels of the students (*N* = 28) were as follows: Self-protective (E3; *n* = 1, or 3.6%), Conformist (E4; *n* = 2, or 7.1%), Self-aware (E5; *n* = 14, or 50.0%), Conscientious (E6; *n* = 9, or 32.1%), Individualistic (E7; *n* = 2, or 7.1%). The pre-test and post-test WUSCT level and TPR scores are presented in Table 1, where all the median and modal scores represented the Self-aware (E5) level. The WUSCT TPR scores did not have a statistically significant relationship to the students' gender, age, or undergraduate GPA; however, a positive, significant correlation was identified between the pre- and post-test ego development scores and coupling status (pre-test: r = .471, p = .011; 22.2% of the variance) (post-test: r = .491, p = .008; 24.1% of the variance). Additionally, a positive, significant relationship was identified between post-test WUSCT TPR scores and participants' previous ethics training (r = .396, p = .037; 15.7% of the variance) for these data. Therefore, the married counseling students and those who participated in previous ethics training scored at higher levels of ego development than the single students without previous ethics training.

Table 1. Ethical and Legal Knowledge and Ego Development Descriptive Statistics

	Ethical and Legal Knowledge (ELICQ)		Ego Development (WUSCT-Form 81)			
			Level		TPR	
Variables	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-Test	Pre-test	Post-test

School Counseling

Students (*N* = 28)						
M	61.64*	74.71*	5.36	5.32	88.75	88.21
SD	8.76	8.24	.731	.863	6.27	6.60
Range	38–78	58–90	E4–E7	E3–E7	77–104	74–101

Note. * denotes a statistically significant change at *p* < .001; ELICQ = Ethical and Legal Issues in Counseling Questionnaire; WUSCT—Form 81 = Washington University Sentence Completion Test, short form; TPR = Total protocol rating; E = ego development scheme level

Ego Development and Ethical and Legal Knowledge

We conducted repeated measures ANOVA to examine the interactions between the counseling students' ELICQ and WUSCT TPR scores and the ethics course (intervention). The results revealed a non-statistically significant interaction between students' ego maturity scores and the course, $F(1, 27) = .352$, $p = .558$; however, the interaction between the students' ethical and legal knowledge scores and the ethics course was statistically significant, $F(1, 27) = 83.45$, $p < .001$. Moreover, the school counseling ethics course accounted for 75.6% of the change that occurred in the students' ethical and legal knowledge scores for these data.

We used a Pearson product-moment correlation (two-tailed) to examine the relationship between the students' ethical and legal knowledge and ego maturity scores. The pre-test WUSCT TPR scores had a positive, significant relationship to the students' post-test ELICQ scores ($r = .429$, $p = .02$; 18.4% of the variance). Therefore, the students scoring at higher levels of ego development prior to beginning the school counseling ethics course correlated with higher ethical and legal knowledge scores at the completion of the course for these data.

Discussion

The SoTL requires faculty members to investigate the impact of their teaching practices (e.g., a school counseling ethics course) on their students' learning (ethical and legal knowledge) and development (ego maturity; Gurung et al., 2008; Hutchings et al., 2011). Additionally, the literature and research supported the need to understand the relationship between counseling students' levels of ethical and legal knowledge and ego development.

There was a significant increase in the graduate students' ethical and legal knowledge from their pre-test ELICQ scores (*M* = 61.64, *SD* = 8.76) to their post-test scores (*M* = 74.71, *SD* = 8.24), suggesting that the counseling ethics courses did support an increase in the students' ethical and legal knowledge base. Additionally, the significant, positive relationship between the students' reported undergraduate GPA and post-test ELICQ scores suggests the students' with a history of strong academic achievement increased their ethical and legal knowledge more than students with lower reported GPAs. However, the students' ego development scores did not significantly change following the completion of the ethics courses. As students' ego maturity scores did not change, the findings support that promoting developmental growth may be more difficult in a short period of time (13-weeks) than the acquisition of specific content knowledge. Specifically, Sias and colleagues (2006) suggested that interventions designed to promote developmental growth in adults should be a minimum of six months to one-year in length.

 The findings that the students' pre-course ego development level correlated with their ethical and legal knowledge scores suggest that these two desirable counselor qualities may influence one another. Therefore, the graduate students at higher levels of ego maturity

scored at higher levels of ethical and legal knowledge (18.4% of the variance explained). Consequently, not only do students at higher levels of ego maturity exhibit desirable counseling qualities such as increased empathy, flexibility, perspective-taking, self-care, and wellness (e.g., Borders, 1998; Lambie et al., 2009); they may also acquire higher levels of ethical and legal knowledge in a briefer period of time as compared to students scoring at lower levels of development.

The results that identified that the majority of graduate students scored at the Self-Aware (E5) or higher level of ego maturity (pre-test: $n = 25$, or 89.3%, E5 – E7; post-test: $n = 25$, or 89.3%, E5 – E7), suggest that these students were functioning at a level of ego maturity where they possess the necessary qualities to be effective counselors (Zinn, 1995). These findings were consistent with the level of ego development of school counseling professionals ($N = 225$; Lambie, 2007) and counselor-education student interns ($N = 96$; Walter, 2009). Additionally, the fact that graduate students who were married and completed previous ethics training scored at higher levels of ego maturity suggests that life experiences such as marriage and engaging in professional development activities may influence students' social-cognitive functioning.

Implications for the Scholarship for Teaching and Learning
This study's findings have several implications regarding SoTL. First, a time-series investigation conducted by a professor of his students' learning and development as a result of his teaching practice (a counseling ethics course) offers a practical example of SoTL in graduate education. Additionally, students' ethical and legal knowledge may be increased by participating in a counseling ethics course; therefore, a primary goal of the ethics courses was met as demonstrated by the significant changes between pre- and post-test scores. Graduate education programs and researchers may want to conduct similar pre-course and post-course studies in other areas of the curriculum to assess the impact of specific teaching practices (e.g., courses and field-based experiences) on their students' learning and development. Furthermore, graduate education programs accredited by CACREP (2009) are required to assess their students to insure they "demonstrate the professional knowledge, skills, and practices necessary to work in a wide range" of counseling settings (p. 17). Thus, assessing graduate students' learning outcomes is a necessary component of accountability in higher education.

The relationship between the students' pre-course ego maturity and their ethical and legal knowledge scores suggests that graduate education programs may want to promote these two desirable counselor qualities, given either that the variables appear to influence one another or that an additional variable, not yet investigated, may have influenced both of these scores. We recommended that education programs work to promote their students' ego development because this research suggests that higher ego functioning is related to greater ethical and legal knowledge; previous research connects ego maturity to higher levels of empathy, adaptivity, wellness, and self-care (e.g., Lambie et al., 2009; Sheaffer et al., 2008).

The findings also suggest how faculty members teaching in graduate education programs may tailor their curricular activities and clinical fieldwork experiences to match their students' developmental needs. As the majority of students scored at the Self-Aware (E5) and Conscientious (E6) levels of ego development, instructors should structure their educational environment one level higher, at the Conscientious (E6) or Individualistic (E7) levels, to promote further developmental growth (Manner & Durkin, 2000). Environmental characteristics to foster students' ego maturation may include (a) diverse role-taking experiences that are personally salient and engaging, (b) guided reflection activities, and

(c) an appropriate balance of support and challenge where dissonance is evoked and an accommodative response cultivated. For example, instructors supervising education students beginning their first clinical fieldwork experiences (practicum) need to appreciate that the new role-taking experience of being educators often evokes varying levels of anxiety (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009); thus, the "main task for the supervisor is to provide enough support for the practicum experience to be educational and growth producing rather than damaging" (Lambie & Sias, 2009, p. 354). However, as the students' levels of ego development did not change as a result of the ethics course, the instructor may not have provided enough challenge to the students to support their developmental growth.

Another instructional strategy that may promote graduate students' development is scaffolding (McKenzie, 1999). Within scaffolding, the educator introduces the same concept (child abuse and neglect) on multiple levels to the students, supporting their meaning making of the principle beyond simply content (definition of child abuse and neglect) to the practical implementation of the content (a counselor working through an ethical dilemma related to child abuse and neglect in a school setting). Nevertheless, the students' ego development did not change as a result of the ethics course; therefore, the instructor may have scaffolded the course to increase the students content knowledge (increase ELICQ scores), but did not provide enough challenge to the students to integrate the new knowledge into their practice to promote developmental growth.

Limitations of the Study

When interpreting the results of the present study, multiple limitations warrant consideration. First, convenience sampling (participants from one class at one university) and the sample size ($N = 28$), limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, there are inherent limitations in a time-series research design, as other extraneous factors may have influenced the students and may have contributed to the actual increase in their ethical and legal knowledge. Third, as correlations are influenced by the distribution of scores, a restricted range may have reduced the observed relationship between the two variables. Fourth, the ELICQ was a researcher-designed instrument that was developed by the instructor of the counseling ethics course; therefore, it is assumed that the ELICQ would measure course content. In spite of these limitations, this study provides a sound example of a faculty member researching his pedagogy, assessing the impact of his teaching on his students' learning and development.

Recommendations for Future Research

To increase the generalizability of the findings, future research should compare a broader and more diverse sample of students enrolled in different counseling ethics courses across preparation programs in the United States. Additionally, closer examination of the instructor's specific teaching strategies related to student outcomes may offer significant insight for promoting effective pedagogy in graduate education programs. Furthermore, a qualitative study (e.g., case study, phenomenological investigation) of the school counseling ethics course may provide meaningful findings for supporting the instructor's pedagogy and his student learning outcomes.

In summary, we investigated the impact of a counseling ethics course on students' levels of ethical and legal knowledge and ego development, as well as the correlation between these two variables. The results of the statistical analyses supported that students' ethical and legal knowledge increased during their ethics course, but the course did not appear to influence their level of ego development. However, the graduate education students in this investigation scored at high levels of ego maturity and this may have been unique to the sample. Additionally, students at higher levels of ego functioning before the counseling

ethics course had higher ethical and legal knowledge scores following the completion of the course as compared to students scoring lower in ego maturity. However, this study was an initial investigation of graduate school counseling students' learning and development and additional research is needed to examine the effectiveness of specific pedagogical strategies. Nevertheless, we believe that the study was a sound, initial investigation of the instructor's pedagogy and offers areas for future SoTL research.

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