

BAR- ILAN UNIVERSITY

**The Contribution of Simulative Experiences  
with Actors and Role-Playing to Educational  
Counseling Training Processes: Students'  
Perspective**

**Nofar Wilner**

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## Abstract

The present study examined the contribution of simulated experiences – simulations with live actors and role playing – to the process of training educational counselors, as perceived by Master's degree students. The unique contribution of both types of simulated experiences to the learning process was examined as well as the students' perception of the contribution of these experiences to their feeling of self-efficacy and to the development of their professional identity, as part of the professional training process.

Professional self-efficacy includes the development of abilities in a given field (Watt et al., 2019). In the field of counseling, the greater the educational counselors' feeling of self-efficacy, the more satisfaction they derive from their work and their interventions (Goreczny et al., 2015). Professional identity is defined as individuals' perception of themselves in their vocational context and how they communicate this perception to others (Neary, 2014). A central issue in educational counseling training is how to help student counselors-in-training to formulate a professional identity. Without it, educational counselors risk losing their unique position in the school setting (Grimes, 2020). This makes its formation especially important in the training stage.

Educational counselors must master many abilities and skills in different domains in order to succeed in their position. These include high levels of interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities, skills and professional knowledge (Lazovsky, 2004; Erhard, 2014). One of the important means for training pre-service educational counselors and teachers is practical experience, which is intended to promote and strengthen students' professional development and to apply the theoretical knowledge learned in class, in practical situations in school settings (Badiee & Kaufman, 2015). Such experience can also be provided through simulated experiences, the subject of this study, especially since practicum in the field offers limited opportunities for experience. Simulated experiences may entail role playing by students as part of the learning process or simulations with a live actor.

Simulation is human imaging which serves as a simple but accurate, valid and dynamic model of reality (Kasperski & Crispel, 2021). Simulations with live actors serve as a teaching and learning practicum based on active experiential learning, which includes four cyclical stages that are part of an integrative learning process (Kolb, 2014). In order to promote learning and strengthen different skills, each simulation is intended to increase participants' knowledge and skills and to expand their repertoire of responses to situations of uncertainty (Zhang et al, 2011). While simulated experience has been integrated extensively in recent years in the training and professional development of teachers in Israel (Yablon et al., in press; Ran & Yosefsberg Ben-Yehoshua, 2021) and in the world (Dotger, 2014; Kaufman & Ireland, 2016), simulated experience in the training of educational counselors has received little research attention to date. In the

present study, we focused on the uniqueness of simulated experiences from the viewpoint of Master's degree students training to be educational counselors.

In role playing, students receive a written scenario, usually pertaining to a conflictual situation from the daily life of educational counselors. Students work in pairs, exchanging roles each time: educational counselor or counselee (parent, student, principal). Afterwards, they provide feedback, either as a team or in the company of the other members of the group, where they discuss dilemmas, questions and doubts. In simulation workshops with a live actor, a student experiences a conflictual situation (the subject of which he or she has not been told) while all the other members of the group observe the scene. Here, the student plays the role of educational counselor while the actor enters the role of the counselee. After the experiential stage, during the reflective video-based debriefing, the actor and members of the group give feedback on the student's performance as educational counselor. The workshop is moderated by an expert in the field. It is videotaped in a studio by a professional photographer and at the conclusion of the workshop, participants view the video film of each simulation for applied learning. After receiving feedback about their functioning, learners engage in reflection about the simulation, examining the advantages and disadvantages of their responses as well as what motivated their behavior (Dalinger et al., 2020).

The present study was conducted at the Center for Educational Simulation (CES) at Bar-Ilan University. It is an exploratory study employing the qualitative method, which makes it possible to focus on an in-depth understanding of processes (Tracy, 2019). The study included three stages, each making use of a different research tool. In the first stage, a group interview was conducted that served as a basis for understanding the students' attitudes toward simulation and for formulating more accurate questions for the semi-structured questionnaire in the interview stage. In the second stage, the research tool was a narrative questionnaire divided into two parts: a. a narrative question in which students were asked to describe one simulation they had experienced during the course that was etched in their memory as a teaching experience and that promoted their personal self-efficacy as future educational counselors; b. questions relating to training for counseling, feelings of self-efficacy and development of their professional identity. In the third stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted in which researcher and participants could freely add questions and answers and thus deepen the conversation in order to gain optimal understanding of the participants' subjective experience (Kallio et al., 2016). The interviews were analyzed using the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) method (Hill, 2013).

The findings of the study reveal several main themes that reflect the students' view of the uniqueness of simulated experiences, both role playing and simulations with a live

actor, and how these experiences contribute to the development of their professional identity and feelings of self-efficacy while training for their profession.

**The first theme dealt with the authenticity** characteristic of simulations with a live actor as compared to role playing by students. The interviewees imply that friendly relations between students constitute an obstacle to simulative success, because such relations detract from the reality of the situation being simulated. In contrast, the actor's role in the simulation resembles reality because the actor is able to "become" any number of characters – whether parent, adolescent student or other – in an authentic and convincing manner. Similarly, the learning setting in simulations with a live actor truly resembles reality, while role playing is conducted in a regular classroom.

**The second theme examined the participants' feedback and reflection processes** during the workshop and after the role playing. The students noted that internal processing is easier after simulation with a live actor because the actor's feedback is objective and professional. In contrast, after role playing, students have difficulty expressing professional feedback that promotes learning. One of the factors contributing to this is friendship, which may limit students' objectivity, truthfulness and the scope of the feedback they give.

**The third theme** emphasized the advantages and disadvantages of **active simulated experience with a live actor vs participation in simulation workshops**. The students emphasized the fact that in role playing, students experience different roles (counselor or counselee), which enables them to adopt different viewpoints, which contributes to greater empathetic understanding. In contrast, in simulations with a live actor, students only experience the role of the educational counselor.

**The fourth theme** was development of a **feeling of self-efficacy** among those engaged in simulations with an actor and participants in simulation workshops. The students raised several important points that emerged from the experience with a live actor and participation in simulation workshops, which contribute to the development of feelings of self-efficacy for dealing with similar issues in the future.

**The fifth theme** was building a **professional identity**. The students presented this in a variety of ways, such as how educational counseling is perceived as a profession, defining the counselor's role and developing self-awareness.

**The sixth theme** dealt with the **connection between theoretical tools learned and the application of tools**, which function differently in role playing and in simulated experiences with a live actor. The students emphasized that simulation workshops apply the theoretical skills learned in a real way and that it is important to have more simulations, with an emphasis on extreme cases, and less on common, daily events.

Findings from the narrative questionnaires and the interviews reveal that from the students' point of view, their feeling of self-efficacy for dealing with conflictual situations as they come close to entering the real world of counseling, rose significantly after the simulated experiences with a live actor and that their professional identity crystalized after their exposure to various types of situations that educational counselors face. They were also more able to define their role as a counselor.

Differences were found in feelings of self-efficacy between students who actively experienced simulations with a live actor and those who experienced role playing. One of the differences, favoring active simulations with a live actor, pertained to how to use the tools and skills they learned in their training more accurately in the future.

The findings also show that simulations with live actors were more useful than role playing in helping students to develop the interpersonal and intrapersonal counseling skills required by educational counselors. These include: empathy, listening, using silence, mirroring, echoing, awareness of body language, asking questions and more.

This study is among the first in the field of educational counseling to deal with understanding these processes as part of the student training process, and therefore the results of the study reflect the unique contribution of each type of experience.

Nevertheless, the present study has various limitations. One is the limited number of simulation experiences with a live actor. It is possible that extended learning based on several simulation experiences over a longer period of time would make the learning process more meaningful. Another limitation arises from the fact that the study data were collected through discourse and after-the-fact reports. Follow-up studies may analyze the experiences themselves and observe the discourse that occurs directly in the experience and without mediation.

It is recommended that future studies examine whether extended learning based on a broad variety of simulation experiences with a live actor on different subjects, facilitates a more meaningful learning process that more significantly promotes the development of professional identity and feelings of self-efficacy. At the same time, in light of the finding that emphasizes the difficulty involved in the "surprise factor" at the beginning of the simulation experience with a live actor, in which the student is not prepared for the subject that will arise in the simulation, it is recommended to examine the possibility of informing students of the subject of the scenario before the simulation, allowing them to study the subject in depth and to prepare for it before the simulated experience with an actor. Afterwards, the contribution of the experience to the students' perception of the learning experience should be examined.

In summary, this study makes theoretical, pedagogical and applicative contributions. On the theoretical level, the study delves into the distinction between two different

types of simulated experiences and clarifies the differences between them in the professional training process. On the pedagogical level, the study teaches us about the importance and contribution of simulated experiences in the training of educational counselors. This is because certain subjects cannot be learned from practicum in a school, such as issues dealing with sexuality, suicidal tendencies, etc. On the practical level, the study delineates the contribution of simulation to improving and promoting self-efficacy and building a professional identity among pre-service educational counselors, and also to improving the counseling skills required for the job. Simulated experiences with live actors contribute to the training of counselors because the actors can represent the counselees authentically and professionally. This is in contrast to students, who have difficulty entering the roles during role playing. Moreover, simulated experiences help students to practice situations they would not necessarily be exposed to in the practicum with a counselor-mentor as part of their training. Therefore, it is important to determine how many simulated experiences with an actor are best suited to the needs of students in the training process, to ensure meaningful learning, especially about situations that cannot be addressed in any other practical way.