

Novice Counselors' Conceptualizations and Experiences of Therapeutic Relationships

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### Abstract

This qualitative study investigated three novice counselors' experiences and characterizations of therapeutic relationships. Thematic analyses of interviews and diaries revealed six common themes: (a) the centrality of supervision and training experiences to navigating interpersonal experiences with clients; (b) anxiety about counselors' roles in therapeutic relationships; (c) the perception of the therapeutic relationship as less directive than outside (lay) helping relationships; (d) experimentation with different interpersonal styles; (e) awareness of countertransference; and, (f) impact of therapeutic relationships on outside relationships. Findings expand upon the therapeutic relationship as a focal point for the training and supervision of novice counselors.

*Keywords:* therapeutic relationship, supervision, counselor training

## Novice Counselors' Conceptualizations and Experiences of Therapeutic Relationships

There is general agreement among scholars that the therapeutic relationship is important to all forms of therapy and that its quality impacts therapy across a culturally diverse range of counseling interventions (Bachelor & Horvath, 1999; Gelso & Samstag, 2008; Hanley, 2009; Tsui & Schultz, 1985). Furthermore, numerous authors have highlighted the centrality of counselors' experiences of the therapeutic relationship to their growth and development (e.g., Orlinsky, Botermans, Rønnestad, & The SPR Collaborative Research Network, 2001; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1992; Hill, Sullivan, Knox, & Schlosser, 2007; Goldfried, 2001). Such descriptions have important practical implications for the training and supervision of counselors.

With regard to the training of counselors, the importance of the therapeutic relationship is often expressed implicitly through the teaching of skills that build therapeutic rapport such as attending, empathizing, and immediacy (e.g., Hill, 2004). Evidence suggests that supervisors operating within a variety of multicultural frameworks tend to focus on these "micro-skills" with novice trainees (Bang & Park, 2009; Gazzola & Theriault, 2007). In Hill's 3-stage model of helping, the emphasis for training is on the first stage, exploration, which focuses on establishing rapport with clients. Teyber (2006) also emphasized interpersonal processes as a focus for training novice counselors whose preoccupation with self monitoring can impede the establishment of the working alliance.

With regard to supervision of novice counselors, models of supervision characterize the therapeutic relationship as a critical focus (e.g., Kagan & Kagan, 1997; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1992; Soltenberg, McNeill, & Delworth, 1998). For example, Bernard and Goodyear (2009) posited that parallel process, which involves the transfer of counselor-client relationship dynamics to the supervisor-supervisee relationship, is a central phenomenon of supervision.

Nonetheless, current models of training and supervision do not clarify how explicitly describing and reflecting on the therapeutic relationship in training and supervision might facilitate novice counselor development. Furthermore, although certain relational struggles of the novice counselor have been identified (e.g., fears about their ability to connect with clients; Hill et al., 2007), these models do not adequately specify how novice counselors understand and handle such struggles.

In addition, research on novice counselor training and supervision has focused mainly on critical incidents, or events that act as catalysts for change, in the counselor's development (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Howard, Inman, & Altman, 2006). Although concentrating on distinct developmental turning points can allow trainers and supervisors to better understand their roles in facilitating these shifts, a criticism of such research is that it does not encourage novice counselors to describe all of their experiences, including their internal reactions to clients (Hill et al., 2007).

#### *Counselor Development and the Therapeutic Relationship*

Several authors have identified specific developmental challenges that novice counselors typically encounter in regard to the therapeutic relationship. Novice counselors frequently seem concerned about their ability to connect with clients and their emotional reactions to clients (Hill et al., 2007; Williams, Judge, Hill, & Hoffman, 1997). They often demonstrate a high self-focus (Stoltenberg et al., 1998), sometimes at the cost of establishing an effective working alliance (Teyber, 2006).

According to the life-span developmental model of counselor development (e.g., Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1992; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003), the novice counselor particularly seems to grapple with the transition from the relational stances of a lay helper (e.g., over-

involvement, excessive advice-giving, and boundary problems) to those of a professional helper. This struggle stems, in part, from novice counselors' often common backgrounds as lay helpers, which include their helping roles with friends or family members. Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) asserted that a principle task for novice counselors is learning to regulate their emotional boundaries to allow them to express empathy without over-identifying with clients.

Research on counselor development has suggested a close link between how counselors manage challenges in the therapeutic relationship and their experiences of either growth or stagnation in their professional development (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Given the centrality of the therapeutic relationship to the developmental needs of novice counselors, more research attention is needed to explain how novice counselors understand and experience therapeutic relationships.

#### *The Tripartite Model of the Therapeutic Relationship*

Models of the therapeutic relationship may shed further light on the importance of this domain for the training and supervision of novice counselors. Gelso and Samstag (2008) offered a transtheoretical model that includes three components considered theoretically and empirically integral to the therapeutic relationship: (a) working alliance; (b) a transference-countertransference configuration; and (c) the real relationship.

First, there is accumulating evidence for the importance of the working alliance to client treatment satisfaction and counseling outcomes. In a meta-analysis of studies examining relationships between alliance and outcomes, clients' ratings of alliance were the strongest predictors of overall outcomes (Martin, Garske, & Davis, 2000). Second, countertransference management, in particular, has been shown to reduce countertransference behavior, strengthen alliance, and positively affect outcomes (Gelso & Samstag, 2008). For example, Gelso, Latts,

Gomez, & Fassinger (2002) found that therapist-trainees' countertransference management ability (e.g., ability to control their anxiety) was positively related to both trainee and supervisor ratings of therapy outcome. An empirically supported model of countertransference management suggested that the two most important factors in this regard are the therapist's self-integration, especially the ability to appropriately differentiate oneself from others (i.e., ego boundaries), and self-awareness of motivating forces behind one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Hayes, Gelso, Van Wagoner, & Diemer, 1991). The research on counselor development reviewed above suggests that both self-integration and self-insight could be challenges for novice counselors. Third, the real relationship, characterized by genuineness, realism (realistic perceptions of others), magnitude (the extent to which a real relationship exists), and valence (variations from very negative to very positive in how clients and therapists feel toward one another) has been shown to predict therapy outcomes independently from the working alliance (Gelso & Samstag, 2008). Considering novice counselors' potentially unrealistic expectations of clients (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003) and their somewhat common need to improve upon their connections to clients (Hill et al., 2007), the establishment of the real relationship could be a notable struggle for them. In sum, the establishment of a strong therapeutic relationship has been identified as a core developmental challenge for novice counselors (Hill et al., 2007; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003; Teyber, 2006). Nevertheless, no recent known study has examined novice counselors' conceptualizations of the therapeutic relationship.

#### *Purpose of the Current Study*

The primary purpose of this study was to examine novice counselors' understandings and experiences of the therapeutic relationship in their first year of graduate training in the United

States. Specifically, this study sought to explore (a) how novice counselors conceptualize the therapeutic relationship; (b) to what extent their conceptualizations of therapeutic relationships differ from their conceptualizations of outside helping relationships; (c) to what extent their conceptualizations of therapeutic relationships involve awareness of interpersonal reactions to clients; (d) to what extent discussion of the therapeutic relationship in sessions is seen by the counselors as an intervention; and, (e) to what extent the counselors' current training and supervision experiences support their development in therapeutic relationships.

Qualitative inquiry was chosen for its ability to capture the profundity of insight and meaning that people attach to their experiences (Morrow, 2007). Case study researchers, specifically, seek what is both common and particular about cases (Stake, 2005). In this sense, case study research was an ideal qualitative approach for exploring counselors' training and supervision needs in a developmental context, because the assumption was that novice counselors would have some needs in common, but that training and supervision also need to be responsive to individual differences. The need for further discovery and description in the domain of novice counselor development made qualitative case studies an attractive approach given the emphasis on attaining richness and depth of detail.

## Method

### *Setting and Participants*

The setting for this study was a large, American Midwestern university with a master's program in counseling and counselor education. A recruitment email was sent to all master's students requesting for volunteers to participate in a research study on new counselors' experience of the therapeutic relationship. The first three students who responded to the email were selected as participants. All three had been in their first counseling practicum placement for

only a few months. The small sample size is consistent with goal of case study research where the focus is on an intensive, detailed description of a participant or a few participants within a particular setting rather than on a large number of participants (Stake, 2005).. Participants were assigned pseudonyms. Karrie is a 24-year-old Chinese-American who had one year of work experience in a mental health setting prior to entering the master's program. Jason is a 24-year-old Caucasian American who had two years of work experience as a mental health technician prior to entering the master's program. Paul is a 22-year-old African-American who had worked in a mental health setting for one summer prior to entering the master's program.

### *Design and Analysis*

The approach for this study was the collective, instrumental case study approach, which involves an intensive study of a few individuals to provide insight into a condition and/or phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Glesne, 2006). Multiple data-collection methods were used to increase the data's trustworthiness. Interview questions were prepared to guide a semi-structured interview process. The interviewer's training and experience as a counselor were valuable for developing questions to attain additional depth and for being comfortable with sensitive topics. The primary researcher conducted a separate 90-minute interview with each participant over the course of two weeks. All interviews were conducted in private rooms at the university's training facility for counselors. Interviews were audio-taped and fully transcribed. In addition to interviews, participants maintained diaries about their experiences in a current therapeutic relationship. The first diary entry involved reflections about their reasons for choosing a certain case for diary writing. Subsequently, they created at least one entry as soon as possible after each counseling session for the duration of one month.



Member checking was used to increase the dependability of interpretations (Glesne, 2006). This procedure consisted of showing participants the initial research findings approximately four months after the initial data analysis to obtain feedback on the themes derived from their data. All participants indicated agreement with the principal meanings extracted from their data.

Researcher reflexivity is necessary in qualitative research because of likely personal involvement with the data collection process (Morrow & Smith, 2000). The first author's background as both a counselor and a supervisee influenced her assumptions that novice counselors would benefit from a greater emphasis, in supervision, on the struggles and transitions related to therapeutic relationships. This author's theoretical preference for interpersonal approaches to counseling also impacted her ideas about important areas of growth for novice counselors. The fourth author is an assistant professor in counselor education and counseling psychology, a program where students are exposed to a variety of counseling theoretical orientations in an effort to empower students to develop their own integrative theoretical approach to counseling. His training as a counselor and supervisor was strongly influenced by an interpersonal perspective. Accordingly, his biases include a belief that novice counselors would benefit from self-reflection on their relationships with clients. These biases were evaluated, in part, through the reflexive process of the research team. Mutual discussions allowed the researchers to examine potential impacts of their backgrounds and their biases on the participants and their interpretations during each phase of development.

Key evidences of validity in the current study included the use of multiple data-collection methods, separate thematic analyses, and retention of convergent interpretations. The study also satisfied the three methodological criteria for qualitative research advocated by Hoyt and Bhati

(2007). First, the focus of the current study was idiographic, or focused on exploring a few individuals to achieve depth of understanding. Second, the primary investigator established an acquaintance with the participants by conducting in-person interviews in their classroom building. Third, the researchers engaged in reflexive exploration of personal biases and preconceptions.

Interview transcripts and diaries were analyzed according to an emphasis on inlets into human experience provided by the text (Glesne, 2006). Text analysis proceeded according to thematic analysis. The first stage of thematic analysis involved capturing essential concepts. Both authors read through the interview transcripts and diaries several times and wrote down words, phrases, and sentences (e.g., *closer emotional bond with them [clients] than I do with my peers*) that appeared important to understanding novice counselors' conceptualizations and experiences of therapeutic relationships. The next stage involved clumping data into themes (e.g., *experimentation with different interpersonal styles*) for the purpose of description. In thematic analysis, the process of making sense of data involves identifying patterns to create a framework. Consistent with a case study analytical strategy (Yin, 2003), the authors identified patterns within each participant's data and then identified themes that were common to participants. This process of allowing themes to emerge from the data is referred to as inductive analysis. Both the first and second authors conducted independent thematic analyses of interview transcripts and diaries for triangulation of data. Both authors met to compare their respective thematic analyses and collaborated on creating the final list of themes. To resolve disagreements in the interpretations of findings, both authors repeatedly examined the extent to which their proposed themes were supported by the data in the interview transcripts and diaries. This process continued until both authors attained consensus on the themes. Themes that were

consistently supported among all three participants were retained. Finally, descriptions and interpretations of themes served to translate the data into information that was meaningful with respect to the research questions.

## Results

In this section, we present six themes on novice counselors' understandings and experiences of the therapeutic relationship, which emerged from the analyses.

### *Theme 1: Centrality of Supervision and Training Experiences*

Karrie, Jason, and Paul viewed their experiences with clinical supervision as indispensable to their ability to both process and navigate various interpersonal experiences with clients. They relied on their supervisors to guide their decisions about worrisome interpersonal situations. They recalled important discussions from supervision about therapeutic relationships, such as when supervisors clarified appropriate boundaries for therapeutic relationships or when supervisors helped to deepen counselors' understandings of clients' presenting concerns (e.g., seeing client as part of a system). The counselors described feeling more confident in their interpersonal interactions with clients after discussing them in supervision.

(Jason, Diary 1) When I met with the client for the first time I felt put off. The client had a difficult interpersonal style to relate to and I was worried that building rapport would be difficult. I was so concerned with this occurrence that I spoke with my supervisor about the client. My supervisor worked with me to conceptualize the client in a different light so as to help me in developing empathy and, in a larger sense, aid me in developing rapport in further sessions.

Paul (Diary 4) described how supervision changed the way he conceptualized one of his client's presenting problems and, ultimately, their therapeutic relationship:

Later, when I discussed this case with my supervisor, she had a great insight. It seemed that I had been approaching this case from an individual standpoint; that is, how I could alter the client's personal, maladaptive behavior. However, it seemed more appropriate to utilize a family systems approach, which advocates investigating and understanding how the one's family members (environment) contribute to the maintenance of problem behavior. This insight proved helpful because I was able to intervene with this client more effectively. I was also able to see the role of the client's behavior without excusing or blaming him, which I felt improved our relationship. In addition to supervision, counselors mentioned course content as a key source of information about therapeutic relationships. Specifically, they remembered coursework addressing unconditional positive regard and interpersonal boundaries with clients. Jason (Interview) shared, "We've been taught to have that unconditional positive regard...here at the program...I didn't realize the impact of the relationship [on therapy]. That was in my intro class, where we really started to learn more about that." Paul (Interview) stated, "You have this certain kind of relationship you can have with [clients]...there is sort of a boundary that doesn't need to be crossed...I probably noticed it a bit from reading and from my supervisor."

### *Theme 2: Anxiety and Uncertainty about Therapeutic Relationships*

Novice counselors expressed anxiety about their therapeutic relationships, although the nature of their anxieties was diverse. Their anxieties varied among concerns about building rapport, wondering whether the counselor was at fault for a client not returning, not knowing if it could be therapeutic to be directive and confrontational with a client, and not wanting to be perceived as incompetent by the client (e.g., acting confident when the counselor does not feel that way). For example, Karrie (Interview) shared,

And I've had clients show up and they don't connect and I'm like, "Crap! Something about me? They're not coming back. Something I've done? But, I've been told this repeatedly and I need to hear it repeatedly. But, you're not all-powerful. Sometimes, there are other things that make the client not come back.

Paul (Diary 1) wrote, "My initial reaction to working with that client was one of apprehension. I am still unsure of how to act and react in unique counseling situations." In contrast, Jason wondered about whether he could maintain the strong therapeutic relationship he had developed with his client; he reflected (Diary 1), "We have developed a strong alliance during our time working together and I have some concern that we may take a step backwards with such a long break."

*Theme 3: Perception of the Therapeutic Relationship as Less Directive*

Novice counselors described their therapeutic relationships as less directive than their lay helping relationships or relationships with friends. Specifically, they indicated that they give less advice to clients and were less confrontational with them. Jason (Interview) perceived that giving direct advice to clients would really "shut them off". He spoke about the importance of being open to experiencing empathy with clients. They also described being better listeners for clients. Karrie (Interview) stated, "[Clients] need someone to listen—someone to understand and be a little sympathetic with them..." Paul (Interview) said, "With my brother, I'm more confrontational. I would be more likely to speak my mind. With a client, I probably would be more likely to listen a little bit more, to try to figure out where they're coming from, and cut back a little bit on the confrontation."

Similar to Paul, Karrie and Jason spoke about being more critical and confrontational in their lay helping relationships than in their therapeutic relationships. Jason (Interview) shared,

“Any kind of role that’s not therapeutic, I would be more critical of people and more abrasive, I think.” The novice counselors also said that they tend to give more advice in outside helping roles. Karrie (Interview) stated, “I don’t think it’s my place to give [clients] advice... They are their own experts. They know what’s best. Whereas, with my friends, I feel like I know what’s best for them.”

*Theme 4: Experimentation with Different Interpersonal Styles*

Novice counselors discussed how supervision was helping them identify interpersonal styles that would fit both for their clients and for them. They said that part of that process involved experimenting with different interpersonal styles in the therapeutic relationship. Karrie noted that she had realized, through her practicum experiences, that she could not always be “Rogerian” (e.g., a nondirective style of counseling, rephrasing client statements, and reflecting clients’ feelings) and was experimenting with different interpersonal styles that could maximize her effectiveness with clients. For example, with one particular male client, Karie’s interpersonal style evolved from one that was warm and emphatic to a style that was more directive and assertive after she discovered that her client had lied to her. Jason and Paul both expressed uncertainty specifically about how their interpersonal styles would interact with clients’ interpersonal styles. They acknowledged the importance of interpersonal styles to the therapeutic relationship, but were unsure about the exact nature of this importance and consulted their supervisors about it.

*Theme 5: Awareness of Countertransference*

Novice counselors expressed awareness of countertransference, as it was manifest in diverse emotional reactions to clients. Jason described experiencing boredom, closeness, caring,

and empathy for clients. Jason (Diary 3) reflected on how his client's openness resulted in greater empathy for his client:

I have felt relatively close to the client for some time now, but his willingness to open up about [client's problem] only aided in deepening my positive regard and caring for the client. I can see now more of his personal narrative and I feel even stronger empathy developing towards the client because of this development.

In a series of diary entries, Paul described his growing affection for an adolescent client. He (Diary 5) reflected on feeling sad because he could not attend the client's graduation ceremony. In contrast, Karrie (interview) articulated her hurt and anger in reaction to a client who had lied to her. The counselors reported using their awareness of their countertransference to guide interventions. Jason (Interview) said, "I've commented on...our [counseling] relationship many times. That was a big help to get him past the defense—to make him aware of how I experienced him."

*Theme 6: Therapeutic Relationships Impact Outside Relationships*

Novice counselors reported that their newly developing roles in therapeutic relationships were impacting roles in outside relationships. Paul explained that therapeutic relationships helped him understand how to improve outside relationships:

(Interview) I'm more aware of the process that goes on between individuals and sort of understand how to improve relationships... As you start to understand about how relationships work, with [clients] and how you build that relationship, then you come back home...I know it helps me.

Karrie said she sometimes has trouble limiting her counseling role to therapeutic relationships, indicating that her friends sometime tease her about using counseling interventions

with them. She also described feeling more cautious in outside relationships after experiencing loss of trust with a client. Jason described becoming less harsh and judgmental and more open in outside helping relationships due to his counseling training:

(Interview) I've actually had people outside comment that the way I act and behave and talk has been much different since I've been here. In general, they say I'm much less critical and less judgmental...I'm very much more open to differences in people.

### Discussion

This examination of novice counselors' experiences at their first practicum provides insight into their conceptualizations of the therapeutic relationship. In this section, we discuss the findings as they relate to counselor development, training, and supervision.

#### *Counselor Development and the Therapeutic Relationship*

Novice counselors in this study demonstrated an understanding of the therapeutic relationship as being less directive than lay helping and friendship relationships. Even as they started their first practicum, they distinguished the roles and boundaries of the therapeutic relationship from those of lay helping relationships. These experiences provide support to the life-span developmental model's description of early counselor development phases (e.g., Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Those authors identified the transition away from the relational stance of lay helper (e.g., over-identification with the client, strong emotional support, and giving advice based on own experiences) as an important one. This study's findings suggest that these novice student counselors at least, seemed developmentally prepared to make role and boundary distinctions between lay and professional helping relationships and were ready to openly discuss the transition with trainers and supervisors. Such discussion could provide crucial support to novice counselors during this transition.



Some authors have suggested that novice counselors typically have quite limited self-awareness (e.g., Loganbill, Hardy & Delworth, 1982; Stoltenberg et al., 1998; Teyber, 2006). This study's findings suggest that these novice counselors seemed aware of their emotional reactions to clients and were open to seeking supervision specifically to determine how to handle and use these reactions in their therapeutic relationships. Consistent with Skovholt and Rønnestad's (2003) conceptualization of *premature closure*, one trainee (Jason) struggled to enter into the "experiential world" of a client and sought supervision for guidance on how to improve the interpersonal connection (p. 49). Other research on counselor development supports the notion that novice counselors have awareness of countertransference, including powerful negative or positive feelings toward clients, feelings of under- and over-identification, and a desire to over-step the boundaries of the therapeutic relationship (Hill et al., 2007; Howard et al., 2006). In the current study, one trainee expressed her feelings of hurt and anger toward a client and acknowledged experiencing a loss of trust in outside relationships due to a negative therapeutic experience. Skovholt and Rønnestad (2003) argue that this tendency to over-process and generalize reactions to clients is quite common among novice counselors. Such findings highlight the need for novice counselors to process their reactions to clients in order to enhance their learning about therapeutic relationships.

The novice counselors in this study described the influence of their therapeutic relationships on outside relationships. For these counselors, contending with the new roles of the therapeutic relationship moved them to be less judgmental, more open, and more aware of how to improve outside relationships. One counselor thought she might be using counseling techniques too much in her outside relationships. Although the life-span developmental model describes how personal relationships impact therapeutic ones (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003), it

does not address the reverse effect. However, it is not surprising that counselors would extend lessons from therapeutic relationships to their personal lives, given that they tend to see clients as a rich source of learning (Orlinsky et al., 2001).

The novice counselors also reported experimenting with different interpersonal styles with their clients. For instance, one of the participants described how her interpersonal style with a client evolved from one that was emphatic and warm to a style that was more assertive and directive after she discovered that her client had lied to her. This is consistent with a theme from the life-span model, which identifies the integration of the counselor's personality and professional style as common among developing counselors (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Hence, interpersonal style and process are potentially important focal points for supervision of novice counselors.

Several models of counselor development and supervision describe novice counselors as often having a high level of anxiety (Loganbill et al., 1982; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Stoltenberg et al., 1998). In this study, novice counselors expressed anxiety about therapeutic relationships in particular. Research has suggested that the therapeutic relationship is one of the most prevalent issues reported by novice counselors in supervision (Ellis, 1991). Evidence suggests that supervision is effective in reducing supervisee's anxiety (Hill et al., 2007). However, research indicates that in some cultures (e.g., Korean) there may be a tendency among novice counselors to neglect their own emotional needs (i.e. managing anxiety) in order to appear more competent (Bank & Park, 2009). Focus on novice counselors' anxiety about the therapeutic relationship in training and supervision--specifically, making the effort to normalize this reaction--could be important for the effective facilitation of counselor development.

*The Therapeutic Relationship as a Focus for Training and Supervision*

Participants expressed a heightened sense of appreciation for supervision and training that was consistent with developmental models' characterizations of novice counselors (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Stoltenberg et al., 1998). In a large, multi-site study undertaken by Orlinsky et al. (2001), counselors rated supervision as one of the two most important sources of influence on their professional development. Counselors in that study indicated that the influence of supervision was second only to their actual experiences with clients. The findings of the current study suggest that although experiences with clients may be a primary source of learning, training and supervision provide necessary tools for counselors to process and learn from those experiences. This has important implications for countries (e.g., China, Korea) where there is no authorized accreditation system to standardize the training of novice counselors. Access to competent and affordable supervision may pose a significant challenge to the development of counseling professionals (e.g., Band & Park, 2009; Gao et al., 2010), particularly in countries that are in the early stages of creating a system of professional counseling.

In particular, novice counselors in this study relied on training and supervision experiences to navigate their interpersonal experiences with clients. They also demonstrated an awareness of relational challenges with clients that enabled them to discuss these challenges with supervisors. They were beginning to form understandings of their countertransference which manifested itself in their emotional reactions to their clients. Given that these counselors seemed to derive an initial template for their therapeutic relationships from coursework, it could be beneficial for supervisors and instructors to be mutually informed about specific trainees' developmental challenges and achievements.

All participants expressed that they experienced some new insights during interviews or while reflecting in their diaries. Research has suggested that continuous reflection is needed for

the best professional development (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). During the participant checks (i.e., follow-up interviews), which occurred only four months after initial interviews, participants already expressed considerable shifts in perceptions of their therapeutic relationships. This supports the idea that continuous reflective opportunities are needed to digest rapidly changing understandings of therapeutic relationships for novice counselors.

#### *Limitations and Directions for Future Research*

Several limitations in this study should be noted. One limitation was the study's short time frame. Exploring how counselors' understandings of the therapeutic relationship change over time would help elaborate on developmental models, the foundation for this study. Another limitation was the small sample size. Future studies should address this issue using larger and more diverse samples. Nonetheless, this limitation should be understood in the context of the use of the collective case study approach (Glesne, 2006), which typically involves using a small sample. This approach involved a methodological trade-off between breadth and depth in analysis. That is, by focusing only on a few participants, we were able to conduct an in-depth exploration of the experiences of novice counselors. To this end, we relied on multiple sources of data, including interviews, diary entries, and member checking. It should also be noted that all three participants had some work experience in a mental health setting prior to commencing graduate studies in counseling. However, the current study did not compare the participants' relationships in these prior work settings with their therapeutic relationships as novice counselors. It is possible that this study's findings on the experiences of therapeutic relationships might have been different if the participants had no prior background in a mental health field. Additionally, the process of being interviewed and writing diary entries might have contributed to the evolution of participants' conceptualizations of therapeutic relationships. However, this

study did not explore how participants' engagement in the qualitative research process might have influenced their learning outcomes as novice counselors.

Finally, it should be noted that the participants were American graduate students from a U.S. Midwestern university. Because participants were trained in a typical U.S. counseling training program that emphasizes the professional nature of counseling, their ability to distinguish between lay and professional helping relationships might be a function of the training they received. Additionally, one obvious, but perhaps easily overlooked finding from the study is that supervisees were willing to share their personal and professional challenges with their supervisors. All three participants in this study consistently revealed inner struggles, as well as questions of clinical competence. It is possible that this willingness to reveal personal "weakness" is culturally and contextually bound. The experiences of novice counselors are likely to vary across country, culture, and training site. For instance, Bang and Park (2009) observed that because of a strong cultural emphasis on saving face in Korea, counseling supervisees in Korea might be preoccupied with being perfect and avoid asking for help from their supervisors for fear of appearing incompetent. Additionally, the dynamics of the therapeutic relationship might vary across culture. For example, given the importance of saving face East Asian cultures (Mak, Chen, Lam, & Yiu, 2009), the quality of the therapeutic relationship might depend less on the authenticity of the relationship and more on the counselor's ability to address the client's concerns about losing face. Accordingly, we encourage researchers to study the experiences of novice counselors from diverse international and cultural contexts (Leong & Ponterotto, 2003).

Many unanswered questions were highlighted by this study. One of this study's research questions inquired about the extent to which novice counselors' training and supervision experiences support their professional development and growth in therapeutic relationships.

More research is needed to assess how the current practice of clinical supervision, in general, addresses counselors' concerns about the therapeutic relationship. The participants in this study suggested that supervision played a central part in attenuating their anxiety and uncertainty about their roles in therapeutic relationships. A future study might inquire about the kinds of supervision interventions that novice counselors experience as most helpful with respect to this and other facets of their induction into new relational roles.

One theme from this study's findings captured the participants' experimentation with different interpersonal styles in therapeutic relationships (e.g., a shift from an empathic and warm interpersonal style to a more assertive and directive style with a client). Future research could examine the efficacy of supervision interventions in helping novice counselors learn from such experimentations. Future research might also examine the effect of novice counselors' expectations of therapeutic relationships on therapeutic working alliances.

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