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Emily Horton
The University of Texas at San Antonio

Crystal Hughes
The University of Texas at San Antonio

Priscilla R. Prasath
The University of Texas at San Antonio

Jessica Lloyd-Hazlett
University of Texas at San Antonio

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Author Note Emily Horton https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7084-4853 Crystal Hughes https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9265-8130 Priscilla Rose Prasath https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1045-210X Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Emily Horton at emily.horton@my.utsa.edu.

Students' Experience of Family Counseling Role-Play With Developmental Considerations

Emily Horton, Crystal Hughes, Priscilla R. Prasath, Jessica Lloyd-Hazlett

Abstract: A need exists to explore student experiences with pedagogical approaches, particularly those commonly used in counselor education such as role-play. Nine counselors-in-training (CITs) who participated in a semester-long family counseling role-play shared their experiences with the pedagogical approach. Through semi-structured interview protocol, we explored CITs' lived experience and meaning-making with the learning strategy. Existing literature denotes that cognitive complexity influences how CITs make sense of their experiences. As such, cognitive complexity scores, rooted in Perry's intellectual development model, are provided for each participant. Data were analyzed using transcendental phenomenology, which resulted in three superordinate themes: impact of class structure, increased confidence, and gained meta-awareness. Findings suggest the value of role-play as a pedagogical strategy for counselors-in-training of various cognitive developmental levels.

Keywords: role-play, cognitive development, family counseling

Counselor education programs invest time in raining counselors-in-training (CITs) to develop self-awareness and knowledge of theory and technique (CACREP, 2016). Beyond individual counseling, couples and family counseling adds nuanced challenges (Karam et al., 2015). Elements of family counseling include CITs' awareness of their own family of origin and approaches to working with the family system (Karam et al., 2015). CITs generally receive less family counseling practice (Hodgson et al., 2007), creating a need for teaching strategies that promote cognitive development in family counseling (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2010).

In a seminal piece on cognitive development in counseling, Borders (1989) noted, "There is a need for descriptions of the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of supervisees at various developmental stages" (p. 17). The need to explore student experiences with pedagogical approaches remains a need for the field of counselor education (Lowell & Alshammari, 2019). Taking a developmental approach to training CITs is especially needed

amidst online training during COVID-19 (Sheperis et al., 2020). Also, a connection exists between cognitive complexity and systemic paradigm, wherein family counseling necessitates more complex thinking than the individual counseling framework (Kaiser & Ancellotti, 2003). A classroom environment that promotes the cognitive shift to interpersonal systems conceptualization is critical while teaching family counseling. As such, this study explored CITs at different developmental levels' experiences through engagement with a semester-long family counseling role-play.

Cognitive Complexity

Gaining an understanding of the self, in addition to the interpersonal world of another, requires training to purposely encourage cognitive development growth. Perry (1999) theorized that individuals progress through four stages of intellectual development, including dualism, multiplicity, relativism, and commitment. According to this framework, people begin in the stages of development exhibiting dualistic, "black

Emily Horton, Crystal Hughes, Priscilla R. Prasath, Jessica Lloyd-Hazlett, The University of Texas at San Antonio. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Emily Horton, emily_mccreary@yahoo.com

or white" thinking and, in time, develop toward actively constructed knowledge based on personal perspective or relativistic thinking (Perry, 1999). CITs progress in their intellectual development and experience various stages of thought, each increasingly broader and more complex than the previous.

Nine positions categorize these four stages (Perry, 1999). The first position is basic duality, where CITs conceptualize all problems as having a correct answer, and as a result, strive to learn the right solutions (Perry, 1999). Still within dualism, the second position is full dualism, where CITs think there are still correct answers and condemn all those not in alignment with the "right answers" (Perry, 1999). The third position is early multiplicity, which encompasses CITs realizing authorities do not have all of the answers, yet wait for the instructors to acquire them (Perry, 1999). While in the fourth position of late multiplicity, metacognition has not yet developed, and CITs think of everyone as having a right to their own opinion. The fifth and sixth positions fall within relativism, first contextual relativism and then precommitment (Perry, 1999). Cited as the most uncomfortable of all the stages, position five, contextual relativism, involves no longer counting on authority figures, and rather, processing the confusion of multiple, conflicting "truths." Position six, precommitment, entails CITs experiencing the autonomy of choosing one of the available "truths" (Perry, 1999). Finally, position seven is committing formally, position eight is learning to make additional commitments in different areas, and position nine is balancing various commitments (Perry, 1999).

Perry's (1999) categories informed cognitive complexity in the counseling literature (Granello, 2010). Cognitive complexity correlated with increases in various attributes related to CITs' growth, such as self-awareness, autonomy, empathy, confidence, and tolerance for ambiguity (Granello, 2010; Ridley et al., 2011; Wilkinson et al., 2020). McAuliffe and Eriksen (2010) highlighted the value of creating family counseling training targeting growth in cognitive complexity for CITs. Further, McAuliffe and Eriksen (2010)

described an educational model oriented to foster cognitive complexity development (Sprinthall & Scott, 1989), wherein a semester-long family counseling role-play tends to all five core conditions of Deliberate Psychological Education (DPE): (a) qualitatively significant role-taking experience, (b) guided reflection, (c) experience-reflection balance, (d) challenge and support, and (e) continuity. Broadly, DPE is an educational approach designed to promote cognitive complexity by fostering a classroom environment that balances supporting and challenging students (Kaiser & Ancellotti, 2003; Sprinthall & Scott, 1989). This course considered DPE in its design and implementation, with targeted goals to promote CITs' cognitive development in family counseling.

Family Counseling Role-Plays

Role-playing is a teaching strategy used by counselor educators to provide CITs the opportunity to practice a variety of counseling skills (Hinkle & Dean, 2017). In one of the few empirical studies on role-play considering students' developmental levels, Larson et al. (1999) investigated CITs in two intervention groups, a role-play group and an observational video group. Following this study, Larson et al. (1999) provided considerations for educators, namely that modeling may be appropriate for earlier developmental levels. In contrast, role-plays may be more fitting for the more advanced developmental levels. Existing articles on role-plays in teaching family counseling are limited, dated, and primarily conceptual, necessitating further empirical research (Harrawood et al., 2011; Shurts et al., 2006). Moreover, understanding graduate students' lived role-play experiences with developmental considerations will inform counselor education practices, particularly in the time of enhanced online learning.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the semester-long role-play experiences of counseling students in a couples and family counseling course, with specific attention to thematic patterns across and between CITs' cognitive developmental positions: (1) What are the lived experiences of CITs who role-play weekly in their couples and

family counseling course? and (2) What impact does role-play have on the learning experiences of CITs?

Method

Given the complex nature of the research topic, a phenomenological methodology is warranted. Phenomenological data analysis examines the participants' lived experience and the meaning-making of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Overall, the design is relevant for the research topic because the research questions center on exploring the lived experience of CITs and the impact of their role-play experience (Christensen & Brumfield, 2010).

Sample

The data collection occurred with the students in a Spring 2020 couples and family counseling master's-level class at a large Hispanic-serving institution in the southern region of the United States. Due to the integration of role-play in learning family counseling, this class was appropriate for the research questions at hand. The course drew upon convenience sampling. The course had an enrollment of 43 students, and demographic information gathered from the participants is listed in Table 1. Twenty four CITs participated in the LEP, and 9 volunteered to participate in the interview. Participants selected their own pseudonym.

Course Design and Implementation

The class was split into two distinct sections: a lecture portion; and a small group, experiential portion, where CITs practiced skills covered within the lecture portion. Of important note, this course occurred during Spring 2020, when the initial shutdown due to COVID-19 occurred. As a result, the course design described remained the same but transpired virtually, rather than face-to-face, for the remainder of the semester. The instructor conducted the lecture portion for roughly an hour and a half, and midway through the class period, the CITs transitioned to engage with their role-plays for the remaining hour and a half. The professor provided little instruction leading into the role-plays. Role-plays occurred nearly every class period, other than the first, last, and one class in the middle with

designated time for students to regroup and practice conceptualization of their families. Students were randomly selected into the "families," with five students in each "family" who cocounseled another "family" of five. Students conversed and determined who would play each role of the family on a volunteer basis, and the students remained in the same role or the role of the cocounselor throughout the semester. A doctoral-level student or professor observed the small group role-plays.

Research Team

The first author is a doctoral candidate with a deep theoretical belief in experiential practices, naturally shaping her relationship to this work. Similarly, the second author is a doctoral student and works from an experiential background in counseling pedagogy. The third author is a counselor educator with extensive research experience in creative interventions in counselor education; she was not a part of the data collection and the classroom activities, which provided helpful insight into the data during the analysis process. The fourth author is also a counselor educator and taught the course through which the data was derived, and as a result, was not involved with data collection or analysis.

The research team is majority white ethnicity, with one person of Indian descent; middle- to upper-class socioeconomic status; and all are cisgender and heterosexual. To reduce the risk of interjecting these biases into the data collection and analysis process, the authors utilized methods of trustworthiness, including field notes, triangulation, and thick descriptions (Moustakas, 1994).

Strategies for Quality

Strategies for quality and trustworthiness began before data collection commenced through bracketing to determine any bias or assumptions the researchers have about the data (Moustakas, 1994). This includes acknowledgment of bias regarding family structures of origin for the researchers who are from a clear mix of divorced families of origin, and families where the parents of origin are still married. Other bracketing discussions focused on assumptions regarding quality of education in

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Cognitive Complexity Index Score	Perry Position	Amount of Time in Program	Age	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity
Ann	238	2	7 semesters	25	Female	White
Margit	337	Transition 3/4	2 semesters	24	Female	White/ International Student from Norway
Mia	403	Transition 4/5	2 semesters	22	Female	White
Francisca	332	Transition 3/4	4 semesters	35	Female	Hispanic
Derek	388*	Transition 4/5	3 semesters	33	Male	White
Esther	269	Transition 2/3	5 semesters	48	Female	Biracial (Haitian, Latina, French Canadian)
Grace	342	Transition 3/4	4 semesters	24	Female	White
Tonya	441	Transition 4/5	7 semesters	42	Female	White
Ant-Man	364	Transition 3/4	7 semesters	39	Male	White

Note. *This is the estimated CCI based on time and date that the survey was completed, but the participant did not include his name on the survey.

person versus online, and also comfortability of students to participate in role-play encounters. Further, in the narrative coding, the researchers clarified the biases brought to the data analysis. The research group met before, during, and following data collection, to ensure accountability among the research team. Following initial data collection, researchers engaged in reflective journaling. When coding the data and checking for validity, the researchers used triangulation to build a cohesive justification of themes gathered from narrative statements across the data sample (Moustakas, 1994). The research team also employed thick descriptions, confirmed by member checking following data collection and interpretation (Moustakas, 1994). Regarding validity, the themes emerging from the data analysis were cross-checked by different researchers to reach an intercoder agreement, and the codes were continuously evaluated throughout the research team meetings (Moustakas, 1994). The research meetings occurred weekly for roughly 3 months.

Data Collection

We utilized a recruitment script approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to invite all CITs from the course to participate in the study. We invited all students to complete the LEP for one extra credit point. From there, we invited any students interested to partake in an interview about their experience with role-play, and provided a $10 gift card to interviewees. The authors took efforts to ensure that students did not feel coerced to participate. For example, participation was

completely voluntary, and the author who taught the course was not involved in recruitment nor data collection, to ensure voluntary and anonymous participation.

After receiving permission from the survey creator of the Learning Environment Preferences (LEP; $r = .89$; Moore, 1989), the CITs were invited to complete the test, a reliable and widely used measure of cognitive development. The LEP, rooted in Perry's intellectual development model, results in a Cognitive Complexity Index (CCI) score, a number on a continuous scale of intellectual development ranging from 200 to 500 (Moore, 1989). CCI scores from 200–240 suggest position 2 (dualism); scores from 241–284 suggest a transition between position 2 and 3 (between dualism and multiplicity); scores from 285–328 suggest position 3 (multiplicity); scores from 329–372 suggest a transition between 3 and 4 (from early to late multiplicity); scores from 373–416 suggest position 4 (late multiplicity); scores from 417–460 suggest a transition between 4 and 5 (multiplicity to contextual relativism); and scores from 461–500 suggest position 5 (contextual relativism). Then, CITs across the cognitive epistemologies were asked a series of semi-structured, open-ended questions about their experiences during the semester-long family counseling role-play. Based on the class size of 43, 24 CITs participated in the LEP, and 9 of those CITs engaged in semi-structured interviews. Although we originally intended to utilize extreme stratified sampling, seemingly due to external factors such as participant interest amidst early COVID-19, we transitioned to cluster sampling. We facilitated semi-structured interviews with all CITs who expressed interest in participation, resulting in nine interviews with CITs across the spectrum of cognitive development.

Data Analysis

Ensuring the quality of data is imperative for validity and reliability outcomes during data analysis. The data analysis began with bracketing to evaluate bias and assumptions by listing and discussing assumptions as a team based on intersectionality (Moustakas, 1994). In addition to bracketing, the researchers also utilized reflexibility measures of providing notes during the interview process, as suggested by Moustakas (1994). The steps to analyze data included organizing and preparing the data for analysis, an initial reading of the data, coding the data by bracketing chunks, and utilizing margin categories (Moustakas, 1994). The researchers continued the analysis by creating descriptions and themes developed into a general phenomenological description (Moustakas, 1994). Narrative passages emerged from the data to support the description and theme analysis conclusions and were adjusted throughout the process by the research team (Moustakas, 1994). After winnowing the data and focusing on pertinent information, the researchers read through and analyzed all transcripts through Nvivo software (Moustakas, 1994). The use of this HIPAA-compliant software ensured accurate and quality analysis. Following, we considered the CCI scores and their impact on participants' engagement and meaning-making through the role-play experience.

Results

We identified three broad themes from the data analysis regarding CITs' experiences while engaging with the semester-long family counseling role-play. After following Moustaka's (1994) guidelines for phenomenological data analysis, we examined how cognitive development influenced CITs' experience and meaning-making with the family counseling role-plays. As such, we address the developmental considerations tied to CITs' CCI scores within each of these respective themes. The first theme was (a) *impact of class structure*, including class set-up and transition in class structure to online platforms as a vehicle for counselor growth. Additionally, (b) *increased confidence* emerged as a theme as CITs experienced support in their skill-building and in conceptualization. Finally, the CITs (c) *gained meta-awareness* through self-reflection of their skill growth and experience along with the process of giving and receiving feedback. Within each theme, we included the most prevalent subthemes.

Impact of Class Structure

The first theme referred to CITs' ($n = 9$) experience of the *impact of class structure* and their

interpretation of its role in their learning process. CITs described the design of the class as "difficult" yet supportive, and also growth-promoting. When considering CCI scores, CITs' developmental levels directly influenced how they perceived and made sense of the class structure. A balance of support and challenge was emphasized as helpful for CITs across the developmental levels. CITs noted their experience of the class setup as helpful, including cocounseling the family with a peer, discussions with doctoral students and peers, and reflective journaling. The two subthemes under *class structure* include (a) *vicarious learning* resulting from observing peers and doctoral students' family counseling approaches, and (b) *transition from face-to-face to the virtual platform*, including difficulties and growth following COVID-19.

Vicarious Learning. All participants ($n = 9$) emphasized the impact of *vicarious learning* on their experience. *Vicarious learning* examples that arose from the data include observation of CIT peers, and doctoral student's demonstration of counseling approaches previously covered in the lecture portion of the class. Another reported an example of vicarious learning centered on observation of peers from a solution-focused approach to family counseling. This was particularly helpful when students had not considered how that theory would operate with the family's presentation, and aided in their cognitive development growth, particularly with students who present with lower CCI scores. In the vast subtheme of *vicarious learning,* CITs reflected on expanding their ideas on how they could approach the family and also learning what they would not do. Grace (CCI = 342, transition from early to late multiplicity) explained this by stating, "I did learn a lot. I think whenever other people were cocounseling my role-play family, I did appreciate getting to see all the different styles and approaches and different exercises people came up with." Similarly, Francisca (CCI = 332, transition from early to late multiplicity) described,

> When you get to observe everybody's different styles in the room, you learn more about yourself too, and what you bring to the table. And what you can work on whenever you're seeing other

people you're like, oh man, she's really good at this and I like that style. And it's like, OK, well, that's not your style personally, but what can you take from it and gain from that? So I think I gained a lot of self-awareness about my own counseling style.

Transition From Face-to-Face to Virtual Platform. The second subtheme under *class structure* is the *transition from face-to-face to the virtual platform* ($n = 8$). Given that the data was collected when COVID-19 shutdowns began, the transition mid-semester came up within participants' reflections of their experiences.

Some CITs, particularly those with higher CCIs, appreciated the flexibility and freedom due to not having grades attached to the role-play experience. Derek (CCI = 388, late multiplicity) stated: "Not having to fulfill certain boxes or get graded on that, and the freedom to choose and to really experiment and fail … that's my favorite part." As CITs progressed in terms of their cognitive complexity, they were able to reflect at deeper levels, including on alternative ways to conceptualize the case and how they would approach the situation from their theoretical perspective. Through the process, they also grew increasingly more adaptable, flexible, and at ease with ambiguity. This was reflected in the CITs' perceptions of the transition from in-person to online learning as well. CITs with dualistic epistemologies struggled with the uncertainty of the transition, CITs with multiplistic epistemologies tolerated the uncertainty but found it frustrating, and those with relativistic epistemologies found value in practicing flexibility.

The CITs addressed both hardships and growth through this unprecedented shift. Ant-Man (CCI = 364, transition from early to late multiplicity) described his process adjusting to the role-plays being virtual after getting accustomed to them being face-to-face:

> I found myself getting kind of worried, what's going to happen next? All these things were stressing me out and I had to just step back a little bit and say, you know what? I'm not in charge of this. I'm just a student here. And I'm just going to roll with whatever comes and how

the professor [of the couples and family counseling course] wants to move forward. And that helped me a lot.

Consistently within this subtheme, CITs described "flexibility" and a "growth in flexibility" through the unexpected transition to online learning. Growing in terms of flexibility appeared to be particularly salient for CITs experiencing black-and-white thinking. CITs noted that flexibility is a critical component of being a counselor, and while the transition to role-playing online was difficult, it prompted growth in terms of adaptability. Margit (CCI = 337, transition from early to late multiplicity) captured this experience:

But you have to be more flexible when it's online because technology might not work like you want it to. It makes me also think I know for myself I'm not super flexible.… And I think, it teaches you to be flexible because with everything going on and especially in a family situation, you never know, there might be a situation that occurs and then you would have to address that in counseling. So I definitely learned how to be more flexible.

Increased Confidence

The next theme referred to CITs ($n = 9$) experience of *increased confidence* throughout the progression of the class. Esther (CCI = 269, transition between dualism and multiplicity) captures the overall experience and growth of confidence by saying, "Overall, I think the role-play process was well-intentioned, well done, and a great experience for new counselors to learn and put their skills to the test." The subthemes include: (a) *gained confidence in the practice of family counseling* and (b) *validation in their choice to be counselors*.

CITs consistently described their increased confidence and growth in terms of stages. Although CITs did not use the word "stages," 8 out of the 9 participants outlined a similar progression. In the first stage, toward the beginning of the class experience, CITs expressed feeling "anxious," "nervous," "confused," "intimidated," and "vulnerable." They described uncomfortability

when numerous people watched and evaluated their counseling, wanting to do well but not knowing how, and other similar sentiments. As the semester progressed, CITs described a second stage where they noticed the "impact" of and "growth" following the experience. During this stage, CITs described feeling "uneasy but willing to give it a go" and "out of their comfort zone but okay with it." The third stage highlighted by CITs entailed additional insights building upon the second stage, such as "trust in yourself and the process" and "it's scary but worth it." Beyond that, CITs reported enjoying the experience, finding it fun, gaining a lot, being able to carry experience forward, and being able to reflect on the experience and reframe previous thoughts (e.g., being intimidated yet becoming more flexible). Holistically, Francisca described the experience by stating, "I think that we as a group felt that we were like our families, kind of messy at the beginning … which is reality [for family counseling]. And then through each session, it would get better."

Mia (CCI = 403, late multiplicity) described her development of specific skills needed in couples and family counseling, notably growing in assertiveness and challenging skills: "When you were the counselor role-playing with the other family that had a teenager, you found yourself having a chance to practice the assertive part of counseling that, in my opinion, I think a lot of people don't realize before they get into counseling that that's part of it." Francisca described "I think it's [the role-plays] really helpful because you learn how to utilize active listening with multiple family members at the same time. So that was definitely interesting to see." Despite being in the developmental position prompting fear, anger, and grief as new counselors, Mia and Derek noted that the role-plays aided them in some of the inevitable discomfort of the multiplicity position by providing moments to trust their inner voice rather than external authorities (Perry, 1999). Derek and others described that as time went on, they "felt like a real legit family."

The first subtheme *gained confidence in the practice of family counseling* ($n = 9$) described how consistent engagement with the class structure,

particularly the role-plays, promoted their skill development. The family counseling skills that are often difficult for CITs, such as managing multiple family members rather than one client, pulling in all family members, and challenging skills grew as a result of the course. Esther stated that the role-plays "helped elucidate just how messy it [family counseling] can be." Margit, for example, shared how she learned key family counseling skills through the role-plays by stating, "You have to be somewhat direct and be able to stop the family. And I think that was something that we learned, how if they get in a fight, it's important that you are able to like, hey, OK, hold on for a second and calm down the situation."

The second subtheme of *increased confidence* is the *validation of the career choice.* Derek accentuated the experience as helping him realize that the profession is the right fit in that he "was feeling more confident in this career choice." Francisca described the experience as "rewiring her way of thinking" and as being "invaluable as she's stepping into a new career." Further, CITs note that this course experience provided a heightened understanding of their future counseling specialization and professional identity. Some CITs reported excitement in wanting to do family counseling in the future, such as Tonya (CCI = 441, transition between multiplicity to contextual relativism). She explained,

> I've never really been interested in working with families until I actually took this class and found that I actually do enjoy working with families.… I found it really interesting to watch the dynamics and try and figure out what's really going on … it was fun. I went from thinking that I would do primarily individual-type counseling to thinking that I might enjoy actually doing couples and families.

Other CITs shared that from the experience, they learned that couples and family counseling is not for them, but they have "a new appreciation" for the work that goes into it (e.g., Esther). In varying ways, from strengthened counseling skills to clarity on specialization, CITs expressed feeling increasingly more confident following this course.

Gaining Meta-Awareness

Extending beyond skill attainment, CITs consistently reflected on personal growth as a result of engaging in role-plays. All CITs in this study described *gaining meta-awareness*, the ability to observe their thoughts and feelings as they were happening. These thoughts and feelings occurring as they were experiencing the role-plays entailed their personal connections with the context or experience, transference and countertransference, and personal triggers. The two subthemes include *reflection of family of origin* and *reflection of personal growth.*

Reflection of Family of Origin. The first subtheme is *reflection of family of origin* and CITs' conceptualizations, triggers, and thinking of their own families to help them digest aspects of family counseling. Many CITs reflected on their respective families of origin throughout the process. Ant-Man, for example, reflected on his personal experiences, biases, and areas of growth when he explained:

> I come from a very traditional family. My parents have been married for 50 years … really interesting for me to get that perspective and get some of the feedback from the others in my group and to be able to understand what it's like for a blended family to work and then to see the treatment interventions that they were using to help.… I've felt more confident in understanding how blended families work together and how that affects counseling.

Paralleling Ant-Man, another CIT described how in addition to considering skill development, he reflected on his family during the role-play experience. Derek explained,

> I think seeing the family dynamics and role-playing takes on a naturalness and then you start to see some of these dysfunctions that your family does. We could have used this, too. So I think just considering your own origins and family systems in some of the role-plays. Role-plays allow you to think more about that because you see these processes and the way people interact. If we were to just read the book and hear

lectures, would I have seen my family in these situations as much? Probably not.

Reflection of Personal Growth. The second subtheme relates to *reflection of personal growth* for CITs throughout the process. CITs of varying cognitive-developmental stages shared their process of developing meta-awareness through their engagement with the role-play experience. It appeared as though the growth in meta-awareness occurred from the beginning for CITs of all levels. Based on CITs' descriptions, the CITs with higher cognitive complexity scores realized their increased meta-awareness early in the semester, whereas CITs with lower to mid-level cognitive complexity became aware of their internal growth process around the middle of the semester.

This *personal growth* was often fostered through CITs role-playing as family members. Mia grew in self-awareness as she was triggered when role-playing as a child. She explained, "Sometimes I got upset or frustrated with the counselors when they didn't acknowledge me.… I was the youngest and sometimes I felt like, oh, I didn't get heard. So then I'd be frustrated." This realization sparked not only clinical reflections, such as the value of ensuring all family members feel heard, but also personal reflections on why that triggered her. In addition, Grace described self-awareness, personal growth, and the necessity of self-care within the profession as a result of the experience; she explained, "I think that having to do these role-plays throughout COVID-19 and the online shift made me reflect a lot about how to manage whatever is going on in my personal life. Like really trying to make sure I've got that under control so that I can be an effective counselor." Thus, the CITs emphasized the value of the family counseling role-plays, regarding the *impact of the class structure*, *increased confidence,* and *gaining meta-awareness.*

Discussion

Counseling programs have the immense job of training counselors who are proficient in both individual and family counseling. The interviews and the LEP data gathered from this study indicates an increase in CITs' confidence, self-awareness, and critical thinking skills following role-plays —

indicators of effective counselors (Barrio Minton et al., 2014; Sink & Lemich, 2018). CITs described growing in these veins, amongst others, through the concrete practice of family counseling in-person and virtually. When sharing their lived experience and meaning-making of their experiences, CITs articulated growth in the complex, nuanced skills for family counseling, including challenging skills and balancing working with various family members simultaneously. Beyond skills, CITs reflected on their journey of growing both personally and professionally.

Through the course of exploring CITs' lived experiences with the understanding of their respective CCI score, we noticed differences in their thought processes. It seemed that CITs with dualistic epistemologies struggled with the uncertainty of the family role-plays and described wanting more concrete instruction, in line with their black-and-white schemas. Beyond that, CITs with multiplistic epistemologies tolerated the uncertainty of the role-plays but found it frustrating not knowing the "right" approach. CITs with relativistic epistemologies valued freedom from the onset, knowing that there might be some moments of discomfort, yet, the experience would promote growth. Despite these varying first reactions, in line with their epistemological stages (Perry, 1999), CITs realized that the role-plays were helpful in strengthening their family counseling skills. Per the results, even if CITs have mixed feedback about the family role-plays initially, this can shift with time. After all, growth occurs outside of the comfort zone (McAuliffe & Lovell, 2006). Counselor educators may consider this when implementing role-plays in family counseling courses or other traditionally didactic courses.

Disparities existed in the first reactions to the family role-plays among some CITs in lower epistemological stages, such as not looking forward to the role-plays, compared to those in higher stages, who often were excited about the role-plays. That said, this study's findings appear to suggest disparate implications than Larson et al. (1999). Learning and development appeared to flourish for CITs from the wide spectrum of cognitive complexity levels. Thus, based on participants'

shared feedback, our findings suggest that family role-plays can be an impactful pedagogical approach for CITs of all developmental levels. Educators may reflect on these findings as they select family role-plays for CITs in a range of developmental levels.

Limitations may have impacted the results. First, this study took place during one semester and within one course. The COVID-19 pandemic's onset was during this semester, and influenced CITs' experiences. Also, one of the researchers was also the professor of the couples and family course. Despite measures that were in place, it is possible that this impacted CITs' reported experiences with the role-plays. Although there were 43 enrolled students, only 9 participated in the interview, resulting in a potential limitation. Numerous potential explanations could exist for this, such as this research occurring during COVID-19's onset. Future research should consider these limitations and explore CITs' experiences within diverse settings.

Practical Recommendations for Counselor Educators

Based on the participants' feedback on the role-play experiences, we have outlined practical recommendations for counselor educators. First, there is value in structuring the role-play component in a couples and family course with minimal instruction. Despite varying cognitive developmental levels, the semester-long family counseling role-play promoted growth. Creative interventions have an element of ambiguity and abstractness (Denmead, 2011), which we suggest counselor educators embrace with confidence. Despite instances where students may express difficulty with the instructions, our findings suggest that such discomfort is integral for the growth of CITs. We contend that educators must understand that the students' expressed challenge may relate to their cognitive development level. Second, after each family role-play, giving immediate feedback and a time for self-reflection through journaling may be key to gaining new insights. This finding correlates with the literature on simulating classroom environments that promote cognitive development (Schmidt et al., 2013). Additionally,

CITs receiving feedback from others, such as doctoral students, faculty members, and peers, appears to promote additional reflection (Sprinthall & Scott, 1989).

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