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## Exploring Possibilities of Predicting Positive Counselor Qualities in Counseling Students from Personality Domains

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## Exploring Possibilities of Predicting Positive Counselor Qualities in Counseling Students from Personality Domains

### Abstract

In this pilot study, the authors investigated the degree that Big Five personality domains may predict the positive counselor qualities among 160 students enrolled in sections of a combined undergraduate/graduate Counseling Skills course. Positive counselor qualities of focus in this study are empathy, mindfulness or self-awareness, and unconditional positive self-regard in students studying counseling skills. The results do not suggest a significant predictive role for the Big Five personality domains for the Counseling Skills students, except that the Big Five domain of neuroticism predicted enough variation in mindfulness and unconditional positive self-regard to be practically significant. Limitations and potential implications of these findings for counselor educators and for future research are discussed.

### Keywords

Big Five, positive counselor qualities, counseling students

### Author's Notes

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Counselor educators are tasked with educating competent and ethical counselors to serve vulnerable populations while remediating or preventing graduation of counseling students who demonstrate problematic behaviors that may preclude effective counseling services or present risk to vulnerable populations (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014). Gatekeeping should begin prior to the student's admission into the counseling program and cannot be avoided (Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). Ziomek-Daigle and Christensen (2010) described a four-step theory of gatekeeping including the importance of pre-admission screening, post-admission screening, remediation planning, and remediation outcomes. Several scholars have worked to illuminate the nature of problems of professional competence among counseling students. In a content analysis of 26 articles, Henderson and Dufrene (2012) identified 34 student behaviors associated with remediation. These 34 student behaviors were then broken down into eight categories: ethical behaviors, symptoms of a mental health diagnosis, intrinsic characteristics, counseling skills, feedback, self-reflective abilities, personal difficulties, and procedural compliance. Swank et al. (2012) reported professional dispositions as important to include as one of the five factors of the Counseling Competence Scale. Relatedly, Homrich et al. (2014) proposed a set of standards of conduct including professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal behaviors; again, many items were related to student dispositions that would likely be apparent prior to arrival within the program. In our view, many of the behaviors associated with remediation (Henderson & Dufrene, 2012), professional dispositions identified by Swank et al. (2012), and standards of conduct proposed by Homrich et al. (2014), could potentially be identified as early as possible within the admission process.

Despite requirements for robust admissions processes including “potential success in forming effective counseling relationships” (Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and

Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2015, p. 5), scholarly attention to proactive selection of appropriate students into counselor preparation programs is slim. Examples to date include a descriptive study of screening and selection processes (Swank & Smith-Adcock, 2014) and a professional dispositions scale (Miller et al., 2020). Several studies have examined personal characteristics with counseling students. Halinski (2009) used personal characteristics and recommended use of group strategies during the admissions process. Swank & Smith-Adcock (2013) recommended using rating scales, observers, and group interactions to examine personal characteristics. McCaughan (2010) found 27 personality characteristics of importance for counselor trainees to possess. McCaughan (2010) identified the top five characteristics out of the 27, and these were empathy, emotional stability, genuineness, ability to integrate feedback, and tolerance for ambiguity. Bethune and Johnson (2013) applied the Minnesota Multiphasic Inventory-2 (MMPI-2) during the admission process. MMPI-2 scores were shown to predict graduate GPA and internship ratings (Bethune & Johnson, 2013).

We were interested to see if a well-researched measure of personalities could predict positive counselor qualities. The set of trait domains known as the Big Five (John et al., 2008) is probably the most commonly researched approach to categorizing personal characteristics (Alam & Riccardi, 2014). In this pilot study, we investigated whether Big Five domains predict positive counselor qualities of empathy, mindfulness or self-awareness, and unconditional positive self-regard among students in combined undergraduate-graduate sections of a counseling skills course.

### **Big Five Personality Domains**

The Big Five are five broad dimensions of personality: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness (John et al., 2008). The dimensions were

developed to organize personality traits along common and recognizable themes. Thus, the Big Five are more descriptive than explanatory and do not account for all individual differences (John & Srivastava, 1999).

Each of the five broad dimensions contain many distinct personality characteristics (John et al., 2008). *Extraversion* refers to an energetic approach towards the world, and includes the qualities of being sociable, a high activity level, assertiveness, and feeling a high level of positive emotions (Costa & McCrae, 1992; John et al., 2008). *Agreeableness* features traits related to social and interpersonal behavior like altruism, generosity, sympathy, tendermindedness, trust, cooperation, and modesty (Costa & McCrae, 1992; John et al., 2008). *Conscientiousness* relates to impulse control and the ability to be task oriented and goal driven, including organization, planning, prioritizing, a high level of diligence, and rule following (Costa & McCrae, 1992; John et al., 2008). *Neuroticism* is associated with psychological distress, emotional instability, and negative emotionality including anxiety and depression (Costa & McCrae, 1992; John et al., 2008). Finally, *openness* features qualities such as originality, open-mindedness, novelty, curiosity, and variety (Costa & McCrae, 1992; John et al., 2008). Though many were involved in the discovery and development of the five domains, Goldberg named them the “Big Five” in 1981 (John et al., 2008).

While many studies have examined the relationship of Big Five factors to client diagnoses and experiences in counseling (e.g., Bayne, 2013; Bishop & Fish, 1999; Miller, 1991; Thalmayer, 2018; Tryon, 2014; Twomey & O’Reilly, 2017), fewer have examined the relationship of Big Five factors to counselor qualities or development. Bakker et al. (2006) conducted a study with 80 volunteer counselors and discovered that a low level of extraversion and a high level of neuroticism in counselors is a strong predictor of counselor burnout. From a

survey of 340 licensed counselors in the United States (U.S.), Lent and Schwartz (2012) found that counselors scoring low in neuroticism and high in extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness tend to experience greater personal accomplishment and less depersonalization and emotional exhaustion. Lent and Schwartz (2012) also found high neuroticism to be associated with burnout among professional counselors. From a study of 156 mental health workers in Australia, Somoray et al. (2017) concluded that low neuroticism and high extroversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness are among “essential factors that promote professional quality of life in mental health workers” (p. 52). High levels of neuroticism in counselors may contribute to the development of secondary traumatic stress over time as they work with clients repeatedly expressing the details and strong emotions of their distress (Somoray et al., 2017). From a survey of 106 graduate students at five universities in the southwestern U.S., Thompson et al. (2002) found a correlation between universal-diverse orientation and openness, particularly the facet of openness to aesthetics, among the counseling students. From a survey of 432 online undergraduate students in an Introduction to Counseling course, Kim and Han (2018) found empathic concern and empathic responding to be correlated with low neuroticism and high extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness. Further, while not a study of counselors or counselor development, but relevant to the constructs of the current study, from a survey of 120 college students at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, India, Kumar and Bhushan (2008) concluded that “only conscientiousness [of the Big Five] proved to be a significant predictor of self-awareness” (p. 205).

### **Positive Counselor Qualities**

A growing body of literature focuses on counselor qualities associated with success or assumed to be associated with success (e.g., Butts & Gutierrez, 2018; Gutierrez et al., 2017).

Identifying such qualities has been of increased focus as CACREP (2015) requires programs to actively assess professional dispositions prior to admission and throughout students' time in programs. In this pilot study, we focused on three such characteristics: empathy, mindfulness or counselor awareness, and unconditional positive self-regard.

## **Empathy**

Empathy, a cornerstone of the counseling profession, is “to sense the client’s private world as if it were your own, but without ever losing the ‘as if’ quality” (Rogers, 1957, p. 99). This means that a counselor can sense the client’s emotions, without allowing their own emotionality to take precedence in the moment. Confirming the importance of empathy through meta-analysis, Elliott et al. (2018) concluded, “Empathy is an important element of any therapeutic relationship, worth the investment of time and effort required to do it well and consistently” (p. 399).

Recent studies have examined the relationship of empathy to other aspects of counselor development. In a study of 305 masters’ students’ level of stress, interpersonal reactivity, and trait emotional intelligence at four CACREP-accredited counseling programs, Gutierrez et al. (2017) found higher emotional intelligence correlated with higher affective and cognitive empathy, and higher emotional intelligence and affective and cognitive empathy correlated with lower stress and distress among master’s-level trainees. In a multiple baseline single subject design study of effects of a counselors-in-training mindfulness teaching intervention on empathic understanding, unconditional positive regard, congruence and client outcome, Newton (2018) found aspects of counselor empathy positively affected by brief mindfulness training with counselors in training. Through an internet-based study of 93 counseling students measuring self-efficacy, empathy, wellness attachment to God, and body comfort, O’Gieblyn (2015) found

empathy related to wellness among masters' level counselor trainees in their practicum or internship experiences. In a quasi-experimental pre-post study of the impact of a practicum experience among 87 counseling students' self-assessed empathy and supervisor-evaluated counselor competence, DePue and Lambie (2014) found that empathy increased through the practicum experience of counseling students.

### **Mindfulness or Counselor Awareness**

Mindfulness is “a state of being aware, with acceptance, of thoughts, emotions, and sensations as they arise” (Campbell & Christopher, 2012, p. 215). Walach et al. (2006) defined mindfulness as “...an alert mode of perceiving all mental contents – perceptions, sensations, cognitions, affects” (p.1544). From these definitions, we view mindfulness as synonymous with counselor awareness, which Rogers (1957) referred to as *consciousness*. This awareness refers to self-awareness, the ability to monitor the counselor's own inner reactions and responses, and awareness of the client's experience. In this article, we use mindfulness as also a measure of counselor awareness or consciousness.

There are at least a few existing studies of mindfulness and its relation to other areas of counselor development. From a study of 179 counseling interns and doctoral counseling students regarding mindfulness, attention, empathy, and counseling self-efficacy, Greason and Cashwell (2009) evidenced a relationship between mindfulness and counselor preparation and development, finding support for mindfulness as a predictor for empathy. Similarly, from a study of the impact of dispositional mindfulness and personal distress on counselor self-efficacy, Butts and Gutierrez (2018) surveyed 162 master's-level counseling students, finding a positive correlation between dispositional mindfulness and counseling self-efficacy. From the same study



noted in the previous section, Newton (2018) evidenced a connection between mindfulness and empathy in counseling students.

### **Unconditional Positive Self-Regard**

Unconditional positive self-regard (UPSR) occurs “when the individual perceives himself [sic] in such a way that no self-experience can be discriminated as more or less worthy of positive regard than any other” (Rogers, 1959, p. 209). Rogers (1959) described a therapeutic goal as reducing internalized conditions that clients have placed upon themselves, which restrict development to one’s full potential. More broadly, there is overlap between positive self-regard and self-esteem. With the unconditional nature of positive self-regard included, UPSR overlaps with the concept of secure self-esteem versus fragile self-esteem (Kernis & Paradise, 2002), with secure self-esteem being more durable across time and fragile self-esteem being dependent on such things as continual strings of accomplishments. Similarly, including conditionality overlaps with the concept of true self-esteem versus contingent self-esteem (Deci & Ryan, 1995) as a contingency placed on self-esteem can be seen as overlapping with a condition of positive self-regard. UPSR is also related to the concept of self-compassion, a warm and caring attitude toward self (Griffiths & Griffiths, 2013). While self-compassion and self-esteem both focus on positive emotions towards the self, they differ because self-compassion is not seen as a cognitive construct of self, or a type of self-evaluation (Neff & Vonk, 2009).

Since higher UPSR relates to secure and true self-esteem and self-compassion, we view UPSR as a measurable construct of counselor wellness. Wellness is extremely important for counselors, as we have a duty to do no harm to our clients. In a narrative study of 15 experienced counselors, Patsiopoulos and Buchanan (2011) found that self-compassion may lead to improved well-being, counselor effectiveness in the workplace (including avoiding burnout), and

therapeutic relationships with clients. Coaston and Lawrence (2019) asserted that self-expression exercises incorporated throughout a counselor education curriculum may promote self-kindness, mindfulness, and a sense of commonality in the face of hardship. Counseling students experiencing self-doubt and self-criticism under the pressure of graduate study in counseling may be more likely to thrive if they strive for UPSR, which may protect against the pressure, increasing their stress tolerance and their self-efficacy during their studies, just as unconditional positive regard (UPR) supports growth in clients; however, there is no research yet in this area.

### **Purpose and Research Question**

As mentioned above, there has been little prior research examining the Big Five personality domains in relation to counseling students or professional counselors. Our purpose was to explore the possibilities of predicting positive counselor qualities from Big Five personality domains. Specifically, the research question was: to what degree do extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness predict self-reports of empathy, mindfulness or awareness, and unconditional positive self-regard among students enrolled in a counseling skills course?

### **Method**

In this correlational design study, we explored students' self-reports of Big Five personality domains and counselor characteristics including self-perceived empathy, mindfulness, and self-regard. This section includes an overview of participants, procedures, instrumentation, and data analytic strategy.

### **Participants**

Participants included 160 individuals enrolled in one of 11 sections of a combined undergraduate/graduate *Skills for Counseling* course offered at a large, research intensive

institution in the Southeastern U.S. Participants were primarily undergraduate students (78.9%) and also included graduate students (17.2%); 3.9% did not report their academic standing. Academic majors included psychology (51.4%), child and family studies (20.9%), counseling (16.7%), and other (11.1%). Expected career paths included counseling (46.5%), a helping profession other than counseling (32.8%), education (8.6%), and other (12.1%).

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 45 years ( $M = 22.50$ ,  $SD = 4.08$ ). Participants identified as women (82.9%) and men (13.2%); 3.9% did not report gender. Participants self-reported race and ethnicity as follows: White (86.9%), Black or African American (7.1%), Latinx (2.8%), American Indian or Alaska Native (2.1%), and Asian American (1.8%); percentages sum to more than 100 because participants were able to select multiple identities.

## **Procedure**

Following Institutional Review Board approval, course instructors used an oral script to invite all students to participate in data collection in exchange for a small amount of extra credit; to reduce potential for perceived coercion, all students had the opportunity to participate in an alternative option for extra credit. Links for data collection were made available via course Blackboard sites, and all data were collected online via Qualtrics. After viewing an informed consent notice consistent with ACA (2014) standards for ethical research conduct, students completed instrumentation. Data collection was anonymous, and instructors were not aware of which students had opted for which extra credit options until students submitted verification of submission at the end of the semester. In all, 86.96% of students enrolled in this course completed the assessment.

## **Measures**

### ***Demographic Questionnaire***

We utilized an 11-item demographic questionnaire to assess participants' personal and academic characteristics. In addition to three items regarding personal demographics (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity), participants completed eight items regarding year in school, major career path expectation, family socioeconomic status, parents' education level, and state or country of origin.

### ***Big Five Inventory (BFI)***

The BFI (John et al., 2008) is a short measure designed to assess core features of the "Big Five" personality domains as described in the literature review. Participants rated 44 BFI items on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (disagree strongly) to 5 (agree strongly), of which 16 items were negatively keyed. After reverse scoring, subscale scores for Extraversion (8 items), Agreeableness (9 items), Conscientiousness (9 items), Neuroticism (8 items), and Openness (10 items) were generated by averaging item responses. Definitions for each of the five domains are included in the literature review, with higher scores indicating higher levels of each characteristic.

The BFI is an accepted, brief measure of Big Five personality domains "when there is no need for more differentiated measurements of individual facets" (John et al., 2008, p. 129). Three-month test-retest stability ratings for the BFI range from .80 to .90, indicating strong stability, and the scale possesses strong evidence of convergent and divergent validity when correlated with other Big Five inventories and assessment methods (John et al., 2008). Consistent with researcher-reported observations of alpha reliabilities of .75 - .90 (John et al., 2008), observed internal consistency reliabilities in the current study were as follows: Extraversion  $\alpha = .84$ , Agreeableness  $\alpha = .74$ , Conscientiousness  $\alpha = .79$ , Neuroticism  $\alpha = .84$ , and Openness  $\alpha = .71$ .

### ***Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ)***

The TEQ is designed to capture a unidimensional empathy factor (Spreng et al., 2009). Participants rated 16 TEQ items on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (Never) to 4 (Always). After reverse rescoring 8 items, scores were summed to derive a total score scale with higher scores indicating higher experiences of empathy. Sample items include “I have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me” and “I get a strong urge to help when I see someone who is upset.”

Spreng et al. (2009) developed the TEQ using items from existing empathy instruments and demonstrated convergent and divergent validity across a range of measures as well as strong correlations with longer assessments of empathy and strong test-retest reliability ( $r = .87$ ). Consistent with researcher-reported alpha reliabilities ranging from .85 - .87, observed reliability in the current study was  $\alpha = .88$ .

### ***Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory – Short Form (FMI-SF)***

The FMI-SF (Walach et al., 2006) is a brief measure designed to characterize an individual’s experience of mindfulness. Participants rated 15 FMI-SF items on a four-point scale rating from rarely to almost always. Sample items include “I am open to the experience of the present moment” and “In difficult situations, I can pause without immediately reacting.” Walach et al. (2006) reported that the FMI-SF correlated nearly perfectly with the 30-item FMI, with an observed alpha reliability of .86. Observed reliability in our sample was  $\alpha = .85$ .

### ***Unconditional Positive Self-Regard Scale (UPSR)***

The UPSR (Patterson & Joseph, 2006) is a 12-item scale, comprising two subscales: self-regard (6 items) and conditionality of positive self-regard (6 items) consistent with Rogers’ (1959) definitions of UPSR. Participants rated UPSR items on a 5-point scale from strongly

agree to strongly disagree; higher scores indicated greater experiences of UPSR. Construct, convergent, and divergent validity were evidenced by expected correlations with measures of social desirability, self-esteem, self-worth, general health, and anxiety and depression. During scale development, observed internal consistency reliabilities were .88 for self-regard and .79 for conditionality. Observed internal consistency reliabilities in our sample were  $\alpha = .92$  for self-regard and  $\alpha = .81$  for conditionality.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using SPSS 24.0. There was no missing data as all participants responded to all questions. Next, we examined scale descriptives for statistical assumptions including normality and multicollinearity. We did not detect any concerns related to skewness, kurtosis, or multicollinearity. We utilized a series of four multiple linear regressions with simultaneous entry to determine the degree to which empathy, mindfulness, UPSR-self-regard, and UPSR-conditionality were predicted by the Big Five domains. A priori power analyses using G\*power indicated the sample size was sufficient to detect medium effects at  $\alpha = .05$  and  $p = .90$ .

### **Results**

Table 1 includes an overview of descriptive statistics for all scales used in the analysis. All models were statistically significant with large effects for predicting UPSR-self-regard ( $F(5,149) = 14.65, p < .001, R^2 = .33, R^2_{adj} = .31$ ) and mindfulness ( $F(5,149) = 14.05, p < .001, R^2 = .32, R^2_{adj} = .30$ ) and smaller effects for predicting empathy ( $F(5,149) = 4.77, p < .001, R^2 = .14, R^2_{adj} = .11$ ) and UPSR-conditionality ( $F(5,149) = 3.31, p = .007, R^2 = .10, R^2_{adj} = .07$ ). Table 2 includes complete data for each regression including  $\beta$  weights,  $t$  scores,  $p$  values, and squared structure coefficients for the analyses. Negative beta weights indicate that the scale was a

negative predictor of the variable; positive beta weights indicate that the scale was a positive predictor of the variable. Squared structure coefficients indicate the percentage of explained variance that is accounted for by the particular predictor; some coefficients add to more than 100% because of shared variance.

Nearly one-third of the variance in mindfulness was accounted for by BFI factors. In particular, neuroticism was a negative predictor of nearly all the variance, accounting for 86% of the explanation. Openness was a positive, statistically significant predictor, accounting for 18% of the explanatory power.

Likewise, nearly one-third of the variance in UPSR-self-regard was accounted for by BFI factors. Again, neuroticism emerged as a very strong negative predictor, accounting for 87% of the explained variance. Conscientiousness also emerged as a statistically significant predictor of the variable, accounting for 24% of the explained variance.

Although the effect size was smaller, regression results for UPSR-conditionality indicated that the BFI factors accounted for 7% of the explained variance. Again, neuroticism emerged as a statistically significant negative predictor of conditionality and accounted for 77% of the explained variance. Although not statistically significant, the squared structure coefficient indicates some shared variance at play, with conscientiousness accounting for 42% of the explained variance.

Finally, regression results for empathy indicated that BFI factors accounted for 11% of the variance in empathy. Agreeableness was a strong, positive predictor of empathy, accounting for 80% of the explained variance. Although not statistically significant, squared structure coefficients indicate that conscientiousness accounted for one-third of the explained variance and neuroticism accounted for one-quarter.

**Table 1***Scale Descriptive Statistics*

Scale	M	SD	Min	Max
BFI - Extraversion	3.48	0.74	1.25	5.00
BFI - Agreeableness	4.16	0.51	2.78	5.00
BFI - Conscientiousness	3.89	0.61	2.11	5.00
BFI - Neuroticism	2.84	0.78	1.38	5.00
BFI – Openness	3.61	0.53	2.40	4.90
FMI-SF – Mindfulness	2.81	0.50	1.36	4.00
TEQ - Empathy	3.22	0.44	1.69	4.00
UPSR - Self-Regard	4.01	0.77	1.67	5.00
UPSR - Conditionality	2.53	0.65	1.00	4.17



**Table 2*****Predictor Variables for Multiple Regression Analyses***

Variable	$\beta$	t	p	$r_s^2$
<b>Mindfulness</b>				
Extraversion	0.01	0.19	0.85	0.10
Agreeableness	-1.02	-1.33	0.19	0.05
Conscientiousness	0.06	-0.08	0.93	0.07
Neuroticism	-0.54	-7.05	<b>&gt; .001</b>	<b>0.86</b>
Openness	0.20	2.90	<b>&gt; 0.01</b>	<b>0.18</b>
<b>Empathy</b>				
Extraversion	0.06	0.73	0.47	0.08
Agreeableness	0.28	3.17	<b>&gt; 0.01</b>	<b>0.80</b>
Conscientiousness	0.08	0.97	<b>0.33</b>	<b>0.32</b>
Neuroticism	-0.03	-0.30	<b>0.77</b>	<b>0.25</b>
Openness	0.11	1.48	0.14	0.18
<b>Self-Regard</b>				
Extraversion	0.040	0.56	0.58	0.12
Agreeableness	-0.13	-1.75	0.08	0.06
Conscientiousness	0.16	2.08	<b>0.04</b>	<b>0.24</b>
Neuroticism	-0.51	-6.70	<b>&gt;0.001</b>	<b>0.87</b>
Openness	0.13	1.90	0.06	0.10
<b>Conditionality</b>				
Extraversion	-0.02	-0.30	0.77	0.04
Agreeableness	-0.06	-0.68	0.50	0.10
Conscientiousness	0.14	1.67	<b>0.10</b>	<b>0.42</b>
Neuroticism	-0.25	-2.81	<b>&gt;0.01</b>	<b>0.76</b>
Openness	0.09	1.13	0.26	0.12

## Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that the Big Five personality domains may have a role in predicting positive counselor behaviors. This general conclusion would seem to confirm the potential importance of personality factors in counselor development from a range of previous studies (Langman, 2000; McCaughan, 2010; Rashid & Duys, 2015; Wheeler, 2000). However, conclusions from this pilot study with a relatively small sample and just one predicting variable should be considered with caution. See specific limitations and directions for future research below.

With reasons for caution stated, neuroticism appears to be the one Big Five domain that has substantial predictive value in our results. With 30% of the variation in mindfulness of our sample explained, neuroticism accounted for about 86% of the explained portion of the variable. With 30% of the variation in UPSR-self-regard of our sample explained, neuroticism accounted for about 87% of the explained variance. Though only 7% of the variation in UPSR-conditionality was explained, neuroticism accounted for 77% of the variance. In each case, neuroticism accounted for far more of the variation than the next nearest BFI factor (85% vs. 18%; 87% vs. 24%; 77% vs 42%).

Similar studies support the importance of neuroticism in predicting negative counselor development. In a study of 305 behavioral health professionals, Greene (2017) found only that neuroticism predicted greater likelihood of burnout. In a series of studies, Kim and Han (2018) found from a sample of 432 students taking an *Introduction to Counseling* course that personal distress is highly correlated with neuroticism; they concluded from the series that personal distress may block empathic interaction.

Further, our results evidence the Big Five domain of agreeableness as the strongest predictor of a small effect, 11% of variance explained by empathy. Agreeableness accounted for 80% of the 11% of variation in empathy that is explained in this study. The connection of agreeableness to empathy fits with many studies that have associated agreeableness with empathy. In a study of 530 medical students in northeast China, Song and Shi (2017) found agreeableness to have a relatively strong association with empathic concern and perspective taking. In a study of 245 undergraduate students at a university in the eastern U.S., Mooradian et al. (2011) found agreeableness highly correlated with empathic concern and moderately correlated with empathic perspective taking. In a study of over 800 Spanish adolescents, del Barrio et al. (2004) found a stronger association for empathy to agreeableness than to any of the other Big Five domains. Readers should note that our lack of practically significant findings from other Big Five domains could suggest weak predictive qualities for Big Five domains in regard to positive counselor qualities or could simply be due to limitations of this pilot study.

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

For this pilot study, our sample is relatively small (160 participants). A larger follow-up study may confirm or contradict our findings. Characteristics of our sample should be considered as potential limits to interpretation. A small portion of our sample were graduate students in counseling who had already been screened for dispositions through program admissions. In addition, the undergraduates in our sample self-selected into an elective course on counseling skills. In both cases, the course included curricular attention to positive counselor qualities of value to their instructors. It is possible participants felt a need to present themselves as more advanced in the counselor qualities measured or had significant development of positive counselor qualities by the time of data collection, perhaps resulting in inflated self-report and

restricted range of scores for analysis. Either way, our sample may be skewed toward higher scores in empathy, mindfulness, and UPSR. Additionally, responses from the graduate students in counseling and the undergraduates choosing an elective counseling skills course may vary from each other.

Further, our sample included a large percentage of participants self-identifying as women (82.9%) and self-identifying as White (86.9%). Women tend to score higher in the Big Five domains of extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (Weisberg et al., 2011). Thus, it is possible that our findings related to agreeableness and neuroticism may appear lower in a gender-balanced sample. However, the percentage of women in our sample may be representative of master's level counseling students and undergraduate students with interests in counseling and related helping professions. As recently as 2010, the percentage of men among members of ACA was reported to be 27% (Evans, 2010). Racial differences across Big Five domains are not yet clarified in the research literature, though the reliability and validity of the BFI has been clarified with a range of cultures and racial and ethnic groups (John & Srivastava, 1999; Worrell & Cross, 2004).

Based on these limitations, further research is needed to determine if a more general sample (e.g., a cross-section of adult learners), a larger sample, or samples of only graduate students in a counseling program or only undergraduates with interest in counseling would yield similar results. Further, adding a non-self-report measure, perhaps an instructor or peer observation scale, may confirm or contradict the findings of our self-report, self-assessment approach. In literature related to this limitation, Swank (2014) found significant differences in supervisor ratings compared to counseling student supervisee self-ratings of counseling competencies.

Further, we measured our dependent variables, positive counselor qualities, at a single point in time. Thus, results suggest the predictive capacity of Big Five personality domains in the participants up to that point in time, which may not match participants' potential to develop the positive counselor qualities. A study of the impact of Big Five personality domains with counseling students across time may clarify the importance of the Big Five domains in counselor development. Additionally, we only included one independent variable, the Big Five personality domains. Including more variables that are likely predictive factors may yield a greater amount of variance explained, as well as a contextualized view of the impact of personality on positive counselor qualities.

### **Implications**

Counselor educators should consider that strong indications of neuroticism among applicants or students should elicit careful concern for the student/potential student's development. Tentatively, counselor educators may wish to familiarize themselves with indicators of neuroticism. When indicators of neuroticism in an applicant are strong, counselor educators should consider if other evidence of the applicant's strengths outweigh the risk of neuroticism. Further, when indicators of neuroticism are strong among current students, counselor educators should carefully monitor students' development and remain ready to help the student remediate the concern. In a study of 288 Norwegian medical and clinical psychology students, Hanley et al. (2019) found mindfulness training to decrease neuroticism and psychological distress over a six-year follow-up period. Thus, the Hanley et al. (2019) findings suggest that help can be possible in the development of counseling students who are high in neuroticism.

However, because counselor educators may not notice signs of neuroticism and therefore of a student needing assistance until students' clinical semesters, we recommend that counselor educators include mindfulness and other approaches to counselor wellness in the curriculum for all students in their first semester. Even brief mindfulness training has been evidenced as having positive effects on empathy, unconditional positive regard, congruence, and client outcome (Newton, 2018). Mindfulness has been associated with counseling self-efficacy among counseling students (Butts & Gutierrez, 2018). In addition, neuroticism is defined, in part, as associated with psychological distress (John et al., 2008).

We do not suggest that counselor educators screen applicants or students by Big Five domains or other measures of personality. The Big Five is intended as a research tool for understanding populations rather for individual assessment (John et al., 2008). Further, there is a lack of clarity on the impact of cultural context of Big Five scores (Funder, 2019), as well as personality scales intended as individual measures such as the MMPI/MMPI-2 (Bethune & Johnson, 2013). Rather than asserting for individual screening, we envision the helpfulness of counselor educators familiarizing themselves with the Big Five domains, especially neuroticism, which had the greatest practical significance in our findings, as well as with wellness and other interventions that may reduce the impact of neuroticism in counseling students' development.

### **Conclusion**

While our results do not support screening of counseling students with formal measures of personality for admissions or other faculty decisions, the most important finding from this study is the negative role of neuroticism in counselor development. From this finding, we recommend wellness and related assistance for students showing signs of neuroticism. Further, given that counselor educators may often miss signs of neuroticism prior to clinical semesters,

we recommend including mindfulness and other approaches to counselor wellness as a point of focus in the first semester curriculum for all master's students in counseling.

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