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Engaged Trauma Training Through Role-Play Observations during COVID-19

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Engaged Trauma Training Through Role-Play Observations during COVID-19

Abstract

This phenomenological investigation explored counselors-in-training experiences while observing role-plays of trauma-specific cases. Three themes emerged: (a) *learning to be a trauma counselor*, (b) *growth as counselors-in-training*, and (c) *connection and engagement through multiple delivery methods*. The findings from this study showed that observing role-plays can be an efficacious teaching approach in trauma counseling courses. Findings also suggest that integrating role-plays into trauma curricula helped students understand the complexity of trauma, increase self-competency, self-efficacy, and emotional intelligence, and engage with the content in face-to-face and online formats. The authors provide a further discussion on implications for counselor education and research.

Keywords

role-play, trauma, counselor education, online education, COVID-19

Author's Notes

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Trauma is widespread, affecting people from every demographic (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). The fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders defines trauma as direct or indirect "exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 271). Approximately 60% of men and 50% of women will experience a traumatic event (National Center for PTSD, 2014). In 2018, over 650,000 children experienced abuse or neglect in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019). Current events and conversations on police brutality demonstrate that numerous groups, particularly Black Americans, endure traumas rooted in historical abuses by dominant groups (Duffey & Haberstroh, 2020). These statistics provide a glimpse into the variety of traumatic events that may precede or co-occur with a client's presentation. Counselors need to be qualified to effectively work with trauma situations and support clients' long-term recovery. In accordance, there is a need to best prepare counselors-in-training (CITs) to navigate trauma work (Greene et al., 2016; Lu et al., 2017). However, a lack of consensus exists on pedagogical strategies for trauma training, with many CITs reporting that they do not feel sufficiently prepared in their programs (Barrio Minton & Pease-Carter, 2011; Wachter Morris & Barrio Minton, 2012).

Education scholars suggest that role-plays (i.e., instances where learners act out or observe roles in case scenarios) serve as an experiential pedagogical strategy suited for a broad range of disciplines (Rao & Stupans, 2012). Role-plays can help students develop cognitive, affective, and practical skills to navigate challenging situations, increase confidence, receive constructive feedback within a safe environment, and improve skills (Bayne & Jangha, 2016; Kolb, 2014; Schwartz, 2020). Role-plays can therefore provide an appropriate method for CITs to navigate the complexities of trauma. However, the efficacy of role-plays to teach trauma to CITs is unknown.

The impact of experiential learning through an online platform is likewise scarce. With significant disruptions to educational settings due to the COVID-19 pandemic, greater efforts to understand the impact of role-plays in face-to-face and virtual classrooms can elucidate effective pedagogical strategies for trauma training in counselor education programs.

Trauma Counseling Training

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2016) requires the inclusion of disaster, trauma, and crisis counseling preparation in master's training program curricula. While these standards are helpful, multiple challenges and complexities surround the approach to trauma education (Greene et al., 2016; Wachter Morris & Barrio Minton, 2012). First, defining and conceptualizing this concept is complex and widely debated (Duffey & Haberstroh, 2020; Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 2014). The varied nature of these events and survivors' reactions requires CITs to craft individualized interventions that attend to the person's history, current life situation, symptoms, as well as the nature of the event itself. Second, while counseling in general is a delicate act that requires high levels of training, working with trauma presents additional challenges (Herman, 1992; Levine, 2015; van der Kolk, 2014). Clients with a history of trauma often have significant attachment or relational injuries, which can hinder CITs' ability to create rapport and trust (Herman, 1992; Levine, 2015). Further, treating traumatic experiences often necessitates a long-term approach and depends on the client's willingness to explore these painful topics (Herman, 1992; Levine, 2015; van der Kolk, 2014). As a sensitive subject matter, it may trigger students exposed to the course content, requiring ethical considerations of safety. Given the prevalence of trauma in our society, these concerns are especially salient when CITs have a history of trauma or when discussing events considered shared trauma (e.g., COVID-19, police brutality) where CITs and their clients simultaneously experience

the event. The counselor's trauma history can further compound all the above considerations (Lu et al., 2017). In addition, trauma courses often remain electives, not required courses, impacting the lack of best practices and implementation in training CITs (Asselt et al., 2016).

Scholars (Greene et al., 2016; Lu et al., 2017; Wachter Morris & Barrio Minton, 2012) urge educators to investigate the effectiveness of instructional methods for enhancing CITs' trauma training. Wachter Morris and Barrio Minton (2012) found that among 193 professional counselors, two-thirds who participated in didactic crisis preparation reported their preparation as lacking. There is a need to explore training methods that facilitate knowledge and skills to understand the complex concepts that unfold during the therapeutic process of trauma work. This study seeks to highlight the use of role-plays to attend to this need.

Role-Play in Counseling Courses

Role-play serves as a pedagogical approach wherein students or faculty interchange acting as counselor, client, and observer, for hands-on practice (Smith, 2009). A practical, experiential approach, such as role-play, is appropriate for CITs for a myriad of reasons. First, counseling is an experiential act; counseling contrasts with other fields in that it is not merely regurgitation of information, but rather, it entails being in the present moment and experiencing another's story (Baker, 2016). Experiencing counseling through role-play allows CITs to practice navigating common and challenging situations, increase confidence, receive constructive feedback within a safe environment, and improve skills (Kolb, 2014; Schwartz, 2020).

For this reason, a number of scholars implemented different modalities of role-plays in a variety of counseling courses (Bourgault du Coudray, 2020; Browning et al., 2005; Hinkle & Dean, 2017). Literature suggests the utility of role-play in introductory counseling skills courses (Bayne & Jangha, 2016; Crowe, 2014). Few studies note the use of role-play in other applied courses, such

as family counseling (Browning et al., 2005; Shurts et al., 2006) and group counseling (Shumaker et al., 2011). Yet, budding research suggests the efficacy of integrating role-play into more courses, such as trauma counseling (Horton, 2021). All studies suggest the utility of role-play in teaching skills, case conceptualization, and developing empathy. Moreover, existing research asserts the value of observing role-play demonstrations, in addition to engaging directly with the role-play (Hinkle & Dean, 2017). Video demonstrations positively impact student learning and development when instrumented ethically (Morrissette & Gadbois, 2006).

The limited research appears to suggest the value in integrating role-play into trauma training, whether it be through acting out the role-play or observing the role-play (Horton, 2021). In trauma training, role-play observations could minimize educators' concerns related to CIT's trauma history and re-traumatization while engaging in role-play. Larson et al. (1999)'s findings also suggest modeling effective counseling with videos as an appropriate choice early in the training process with CITs. Increased role-play scenarios may facilitate more depth in trauma education. However, there is not enough empirical research on role-play observations as a pedagogical tool in trauma training. Research focusing on CITs observing role-play can introduce meaningful, versatile strategies of using role-plays in trauma training.

Experiential Learning in Online Counselor Education

Experiential learning serves as the theoretical lens for this study. Keeton and Tate (1978) defined experiential learning as, "Learning in which the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied. It is contrasted with the learner who only reads about, hears about, talks about, or writes about these realities but never comes into contact with them as part of the learning process" (p. viii). Within the experiential pedagogical perspective, counselor educators serve as instigators of learning contrary to instillers of learning (Dewey, 1933). This instigation of the

learning approach triggers interest and effort in the learner. Beyond this, we considered experiential learning through online education in this research investigation.

Role-plays can be incorporated into online courses in multiple ways: pre-recorded videos, breakout rooms for live virtual practice, and a few programs that have even experimented with virtual reality (VR) avatars as clients (Haddock et al., 2020). As of 2020, there were 69 CACREP-accredited master's programs being conducted online, with over 25% of counseling students enrolled in distance education programs (Snow & Coker, 2020). Yet, amidst the need for online courses, especially during the pandemic, experiential learning infused into these courses remains a growth edge for counselor education. Further, research has found that online learning in counselor education is more effective when it includes opportunities to observe experts modeling counseling, such as in videos of role-plays, or online practice sessions (Snow & Coker, 2020). However, the use of role-plays observations in an online format remains inexistent.

This study followed recommendations to investigate the effectiveness of instructional methods for enhancing CITs' trauma training (Greene et al., 2016; Lu et al., 2017; Wachter Morris & Barrio Minton, 2012) focused particularly on the use of role-play observations in an online course. The presented study occurred during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and offered an opportunity to address this gap in the literature. Using a phenomenological qualitative research design, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of CITs while observing role-plays on trauma-specific cases in a face-to-face and virtual course. The research question guiding this study was: What were CITs' self-reported experiences while observing role-plays on trauma-specific cases in a face-to-face and virtual course?

Method

Phenomenology emphasizes “the individual and collective internal experience for a phenomenon of interest and how participants intentionally and consciously think about their experiences” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 291). Transcendental phenomenology, in particular, aims to collect participants’ experiences while consistently bracketing and addressing researchers’ expectations, known as *epoche*, to produce a purer, “transcended” description of the researched phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). Due to the second author’s connection to the trauma and grief course, described below, and the first author’s previous experiences with role plays, transcendental phenomenology was best suited to reduce researcher bias and explore the essence of CITs’ experiences with role-play. The goal of this study was to capture CITs’ essential descriptions of their shared lived experience while remaining grounded on intuition and self-reflection; therefore, the use of transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994) was deemed the most appropriate method of study.

Research Team Positionality

In the present study, the research team consisted of four researchers, two doctoral students (first and third authors), one assistant professor (second author), and a master’s student (fourth author) from a CACREP-accredited counselor education program. The first author, who served as a teaching assistant throughout this course, identified as a White female and first-generation college student, with previous experiences learning and teaching through the use of role-plays. The second author identified as Honduran, has extensive experience conducting qualitative research, and taught the course based on clinical experience primarily focused on trauma. The third and fourth authors identified as White females and joined the team at the end of the course for data collection and analysis. To allow individual experiences to emerge, the authors made efforts to bracket their a priori experiences regarding the course content, role-plays, and online learning

(Hays & Singh, 2012). All authors, particularly the first author, were proponents of experiential learning in trauma training as a pedagogical strategy to increase self-efficacy and competence. At the same time, all authors preferred face-to-face interactions over online learning, an important consideration given the forced shift to an online platform due to COVID-19 restrictions. It was therefore important for the authors to present CITs' experience with role-plays face-to-face and online accurately, without focusing primarily on the benefits of role-play or the limitations of online pedagogical approaches.

Trauma and Grief Course Description

Students observed role-plays in a trauma, crisis, and grief counseling course in Spring 2020 at a Hispanic serving CACREP-accredited institution in the south-central region of the United States. This course is a required course in the clinical mental counseling program and an elective for school counseling students. Students take the course at different stages of their program sequence (i.e., pre-practicum, practicum, internship). A major component of the course content was the inclusion of case studies and role-play observations ($n = 7$) to further elucidate a trauma scenario. For example, a lecture on sex trafficking included a case study and a role-play observation depicting a client's experience. After the lecture, students read the case study describing the client and the presenting issue. Role-play observations of about 10-20 minutes followed. To reduce any instance of re-traumatization and/or vicarious trauma, the instructor (second author) chose to have the first author simulate the client in all role-plays. Although re-traumatization and/or vicarious trauma is possible through observation, we consciously determined that watching role-plays rather than enacting traumatic scenarios allowed for more emotional distance. Considering that some students were early in their program sequence and had not taken any skills courses, the instructor simulated the counselor in all role-plays. Students then

engaged in small and/or large class discussions. The first half of the course took place face-to-face. Due to COVID-19, the second half of the class took place in synchronous online meetings without any changes to the course structure. Although this course also included crisis and grief-specific role-plays, the authors chose to only focus on the trauma-specific role-plays for the purpose of this study.

Sampling and Participants

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the authors used convenience sampling to recruit participants due to the niche design and implementation of the course. Inclusion criteria consisted of master's level students enrolled in a trauma, crisis, and grief counseling course in Spring 2020. The course had an enrollment of 17 students. A total of 13 participants volunteered to participate. Of the total sample, seven identified as female, five as male, and one as genderqueer. Most participants ($n = 12$) were in the clinical mental health counseling program, while one was a school counseling student.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Data collection procedures occurred in two phases. In phase one, the first author invited all students to participate in focus group interviews during the last online synchronous meeting. The authors took efforts to ensure that students did not feel coerced to participate. For example, participation was completely voluntary, the second author exited the online platform to ensure voluntary and anonymous participation, and the first, third, and fourth authors handled data collection in its entirety. The first, third, and fourth authors each conducted one focus group, using a semi-structured interview protocol that lasted from 40-60 minutes. Sample questions included: (a) What were your experiences while watching the role plays/videos and participating in the discussion that followed? and (b) What feelings did that bring up for you? The second phase

consisted of the first author sending a second invitation to all students who participated in the first phase to complete an individual interview. Six students volunteered for an online semi-structured interview that lasted from 30-60 minutes. The individual interview posed more in-depth questions such as (a) Has this course contributed to your understanding of trauma? If so, how? and (b) How did the transition to online learning impact your experience of the role-plays and discussions following? The first, third, and fourth authors recorded and transcribed all interviews verbatim, de-identified the data, and applied pseudonyms.

The authors used Moustakas (1994) van Kaam's (1966) phenomenological data analysis method which included seven steps. The first step included the first, third, and fourth authors reading and rereading all transcripts to record all relevant statements to understand the lived experiences of CITs in the course. Through this process of horizontalization, the authors engaged in line-by-line coding, treating all data equally to code nonrepetitive, and nonoverlapping statements. For this, the authors used NVivo, a qualitative analysis software, to improve the consistency and transparency of our coding process. Second, all authors determined the invariant constituents from redundant and ancillary information through a process of reduction and elimination. Following this initial coding, all authors explored the latent meanings and clustered invariant constituents into themes, ensuring that all themes were representative of the participants' experiences. Fourth, using the final codebook, the first author began the recursive coding process to recode every interview and reach a final consensus. Fifth, the authors synthesized themes into textural descriptions of participants' experiences, including verbatim quotes and emotional, social, and cultural connections to create a textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of experience (Moustakas, 1994). Using the individual textural-structural descriptions, the authors

engaged in the sixth and seventh steps by creating composite textural and structural descriptions for the entire sample, outlining the reoccurring and prominent themes.

Strategies for Trustworthiness

The authors engaged in multiple strategies to meet trustworthiness criteria, such as transferability, confirmability, dependability, and credibility. Some specific strategies included using triangulation of data sources, researcher triangulation, member-checking, external auditing, in-depth description of the analyses, and providing a thick description of the data (Hays & Singh, 2012). The individual interviews triangulated the focus group interview data allowing participants to share their own experiences while also providing collective meaning to the phenomenon of interest. All authors participated in weekly bracketing meetings for several months to reduce researcher bias by openly challenging each other and ourselves. The research team also engaged in member-checking and had an external auditor, knowledgeable of qualitative research, for dependability and confirmability. Participants received copies of the final themes for verification. Participants and the external auditor confirmed the findings.

Results

Three themes emerged from the data analysis regarding CITs' experiences while observing role-plays on trauma. These included (a) *learning to be a trauma counselor*, (b) *growth as counselors-in-training*, and (c) *connection and engagement through multiple delivery methods*. Within each subtheme, the authors included the most prevalent subthemes.

Learning to be a Trauma Counselor

The first theme referred to CITs' ($n = 13$) ability to gain a deeper understanding of the intricacies of trauma work under two subthemes: (a) *in-depth understanding of trauma* and (b) *applying theory into practice*.

In-Depth Understanding of Trauma

All participants ($n = 13$) repeatedly noted that they developed a more “nuanced” understanding of trauma through the combination of role-plays and other pedagogical techniques. CITs shared that in addition to learning a number of salient topics conceptually, observing role-plays provided a demonstration of real-life case scenarios that made difficult, layered concepts easier to understand. "It really allowed me to have a better grasp and understand the concept and see how it would potentially be used in a real-life situation," expressed Allison. Participants also reported gaining awareness of the individual nature of trauma impacting "each person in a different way." Sofia noted, "there could be two people who come in with similar trauma...but the way they experience it and the way they cope and deal with it is so unique to that individual, their culture...their gender." She added, "it was good to see how it could be used in different ways with different clients." Gaining a better understanding of these concepts clarified the process of trauma counseling and the role of the counselor. Sofia added,

With the role-plays and with the class it showed a lot of different avenues...it just opened my eyes to the different possibilities of a client and what that therapeutic relationship might look like.

Participants felt these exercises provided examples of how to “collaborate” with the client. Moreover, CITs gleaned that trauma is not about “fixing” clients or “healing them.” Instead, role-plays demonstrated how counselors can “hold space for them,” stated Voltron.

Applying Theory into Practice

All participants ($n = 13$) highlighted that applying theory into practice further crystallized their understanding of the role of trauma counselors. Role-play observations brought theory to life by modeling several important elements of counseling. Jessenia stated, “I feel like it's very easy to

kind of learn about [it in] like a textbook...but what really matters is applying it.” Ryley stated that role-plays were helpful to observe “theory or technique” or “how we work with clients” because “[role-plays] made it a little bit more real.” They added, “reading out of a textbook you can get all the concepts, but actually seeing it work in-person in a counseling session, it was like, oh, this is how it would actually go down in a session.” Sidika explained how role-plays modeling real-life clients’ presenting symptoms improved her comprehension of diagnosis at her internship site,

I think they make the course content more realistic...for example, the DSM-5 criteria...I was expecting to see all criteria for each client. And then I realized it's not a common thing to have all criteria for one mental health problem...the experiential activities were more likely to be seen in real life, in real counseling.

Growth as Counselors-in-Training

Most students ($n = 10$) referenced growth as CITs as a result of role-play observations. The authors noted that although CITs were at different levels in their program, they reported an increase in (a) *self-competence*, (b) *self-efficacy*, and (c) *emotional intelligence*.

Increased Self-Competence

The subtheme of increased self-competence identified instances when CITs denoted an increase in their ability to understand the knowledge and skills necessary to ensure quality trauma services. Many participants ($n = 9$) alluded that observing a variety of trauma-specific scenarios provided a reference for “what kind of tips and tricks we could use,” explained Sofia. “I think that [the role-plays] really put things in perspective for me in the case of how to do this or, what to say, or meeting the client where they're at,” added Rico. Jimena similarly expressed, “being able to watch a role-play and understanding like, OK, they're doing this because they're trying to exhibit A, B, or C and this is why we need to look out for A, B, and C.” CITs also felt that role-plays were

a “huge help” in “seeing how we should *actually* be applying techniques and skills.” “Especially for people barely beginning to work with this type of population,” stated Rico. Many of the participants were completing practicum or internship at the time and felt the role-plays “helped them prepare” for their ongoing work with clients, as stated by Jimena. Ryley added,

You have to be aware of how to respond to clients...from facial expressions to word choice. Everything counts... It was a good opportunity to see... to observe the progress of the clients after, you know, huge transitions and huge problems.

CITs reported self-reflection on how they would approach cases, consider different perspectives, think critically from a counseling perspective, and operate as a knowledgeable trauma counselor. Sidika explained how observing and discussing different perspectives was difficult for her because it encouraged her to “think different, a different approach or different position.” She added, “before that, I think I couldn't imagine myself as a, you know, a counselor.”

Increased Self-Efficacy

Similar to self-competence, some participants ($n = 6$) reported growing in confidence in their ability to perform counseling-related activities. CITs stated that by observing a variety of trauma scenarios they could “picture yourself doing it as well,” as stated by Amanda. CITs who spoke of this, felt “excited,” “intrigued,” “interested,” and “confident” in terms of working with trauma. Participants reported that the course content and activities re-affirmed their counselor identity and the value they place on counseling. Sidika spoke on how the challenge of the exercises increased her ability to envision herself as the counselor, noting, “it was definitely challenging. But also, I also like challenge because it's makes me feel... like more counselor-ish.” Francis also accentuated the value of watching demonstrations, stating, “it [the role-plays] helped me feel more

confident in my abilities to counsel clients.” Allison added that the role-plays decreased her anxiety about retraumatizing clients. She explained,

One of my biggest fears going into practicum was to hurt somebody. We're always told...don't retraumatize somebody. So, kind of being able to see how, you know, how not to do that...what's the best ways to handle trauma, really kind of help alleviate some of those concerns that I had.

Increased Emotional Intelligence

Through the course, many CITs ($n = 9$) not only grew in content areas but also reported increased emotional intelligence. In this study, students demonstrated growth in emotional intelligence through (a) managing personal trauma, (b) managing anxiety, namely, that of performance-related anxiety, (c) understanding how to mitigate vicarious trauma, (d) enhanced emotional awareness and emotional regulation, and (e) enhanced ability to engage empathetically with others. Allison referenced validating and embracing her trauma when difficult subjects came up, "some of them [the role-plays]...hit home a little bit more...so there was always kind of a little bit of a feeling inside, a little bit of squeezing in my heart in some cases." She explained that role-plays and class discussions highlighted the importance of being “aware” when “you're having these emotions.” Rico added that observing the role-plays helped him understand that counselors do not take the “emotional piece out of it per se, because at the end of the day, we're all human beings and we're still going to have emotions that come up because of certain things that we hear or see.” Yet, observing the role-plays seemed to help CITs learn what to do in those instances. Sidika further elucidated this point, “sometimes it was heavy in content, but also learning about what to do about, you know, those kind of difficult situations made me feel more powerful.”

Participants also noticed that role-plays helped them understand the emotional presentation of clients by depicting real-life client emotions. CITs shared that observing congruences and incongruencies between what the client was saying, and their non-verbal cues facilitated a greater understanding of how to work with and conceptualize trauma. Jimena shared,

It [role-plays] helped me as far as practicing like looking at nonverbals, whether it was facial expressions, body language, eye contact...popping knuckles...the way the hands were placed...all these different little things that I never would have necessarily thought to look at before...that really like pieced it together for me and really kind of cemented it.

Connection and Engagement through Multiple Delivery Methods

All participants ($n = 13$) reported a sense of connection and engagement with the professor, the content, and themselves through multiple delivery methods, including in-person and online learning. Despite COVID-19's disruption of students' learning environment, the role-plays created a sense of continuity, connection, and engaged learning most frequently through (a) *learning styles*, and (b) *online learning during COVID-19*.

Learning Styles

Participants ($n = 11$) consistently referenced their respective “learning styles” and how the role-plays fostered a training environment that suited their preferences. By and large, students highlighted that role-plays were “conducive to learning” since they addressed “different learning styles...that could be applicable for everyone,” from “kinesthetic” to “visual.” Allison explained,

Hearing and learning about all of the theories is great, but sometimes it's still hard for me to grasp. So being able to see it in the role-plays and the experiential part was really beneficial for me...I can kind of picture that if I'm in a scenario

with the client, I can be like oh yeah I remember that one time that I saw this happen in class and I can kind of put it into my real-life scenario as opposed to trying to find that information that I read in an article.

Bea also attested to this sentiment by elaborating how the course helped her connect with the material, "it enhanced learning...it helped tie everything in together to be able to see it played out in real-time." Roger echoed how as a visual learner, role-plays created an emotional connection that facilitated his learning, "it was nice to see, you know, different facial cues...how like the counselor reacted to the client...the different emotions...I feel like it was really helpful and it kind of put things into perspective from an emotional standpoint."

Online Learning during COVID-19

Most students ($n = 10$) repeatedly noted the difficulty in learning through online modalities in general. Several participants, including Gail, noted that they preferred role-plays in-person over watching them online, explaining, "I felt that the role-plays, I guess, practiced in class were more effective than the ones online simply because the professor could pause and scan the room and see based off of our expressions. She added, "she could just register whether she needed to pause and explain what she was doing at the moment." That said, most of them ($n = 9$) also valued and appreciated the role-plays integrated into the course following its transition to distance learning due to COVID-19. Several students compared this course to other courses they were taking through the transition to online, emphasizing that they valued the emphasis put on connection and experiential learning in this course. CITs reported feeling "disconnected," "disheartened," and "sad" with the lack of interaction in other courses. "In my other classes, I didn't have any online classes, we have just PowerPoints and exams and, you know, assignments and I hated this," stated

Jimena. Instead, Jimena reported feeling “grateful” for the inclusion of role-play videos that helped her feel engaged, rather than just “having slides and assignments.”

Participants discussed how role-plays increased the course’s continuity and decreased the felt disruption following unprecedented instructional shifts. CITs used phrases such as “seamless transition,” “streamlined,” and “I loved seeing how she adapted our class to being online and we’re still able to get the course material really fluidly” when describing their experience in this course. Participants highlighted that the continuity and fluidity of role-plays helped to ease the unexpected transition and provide a sense of security during a time of instability. Sidika reported,

I think it was more helpful to have videos and we have the opportunity to watch it again. I think it's a huge opportunity because sometimes we cannot focus well.

For some videos, I think I watched several times to understand better. So, I definitely preferred experiential activities and videos online.

Discussion

Findings support existing literature on the efficacy of role-plays as a pedagogical strategy in counselor education, including its utility in helping students learn specific skills, experience the therapeutic relationship, and reflect on the process after sessions (Crowe, 2014; Shurts et al., 2006; Smith, 2009). Like experiential learning literature (Bourgault du Coudray, 2020; Kolb, 2014), findings from this study showed that application-oriented learning fostered a more profound understanding of the material, an opportunity to engage with real-world applications, and a deeper connection with others. This study showed how role-play observations can be an efficacious teaching approach in courses beyond counseling skills, specifically in teaching trauma counseling. Findings also suggest that integrating role-play observations into trauma curricula can be appropriate in educating CITs at various developmental levels.

Not only do role-play observations help students in understanding the complexity of trauma, but they also increase self-competence, self-efficacy, and emotional intelligence, critical elements of counselor identity development (Kolb, 2014; Schwartz, 2020). Moreover, role-play observations fostered CITs' confidence in performing the tasks appropriate for trauma. Observing how the "counselor" applied certain skills and techniques and processing how the "client" responded provided a safe environment to observe mistakes, ask questions, and consider different approaches to trauma work. At the conclusion of the course, students reported increased self-efficacy, competence, and emotional intelligence because of the opportunity to directly engage, in a safe way, with this challenging content area. Many students, for the first time, began to see themselves as trauma counselors.

Role-play observations fostered a connection with students and the professor via face-to-face and online interactions and provided opportunities for subsequent connections to the material. Schwartz (2020) suggests that a relational approach, such as role-play, may be more effective in generating student engagement. Although most participants continued to prefer face-to-face interactions, the use of role-play observations facilitated engagement and connection through an online platform and eased the unexpected transition due to the COVID-19 pandemic. CITs in this study reported that the role-play observations and discussions following were valuable and helped to normalize their experiences (e.g., feeling anxious, overthinking, drawing a blank). Therefore, this study indicates that role-play observations are effective for trauma counseling courses in both face-to-face and virtual modalities.

Implications for Counselor Educators

This study's findings confirm that role-play observations are a versatile pedagogical tool. Integrating role-play observations into trauma curricula, as well as other counseling courses,

appears to promote student learning despite pervasive concerns in doing so in this course. The literature demonstrates the efficacy of role-play in a variety of formats, such as when students role-play as the counselor and when they watch demonstrations alike (Larson et al., 1999). While this data derived from watching role-plays rather than role-playing as the counselor, students still reported significant growth. This finding is crucial for educators designing and facilitating their courses, as it suggests that either approach, inviting students to role-play as the counselor or watching demonstrations aids in student development. Educators, at times, stray away from role-plays due to misconceptions about their utility in varied formats (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2010). Watching role-plays appears to be helpful when educators are concerned about re-traumatizing students when asked to play out scenarios due to the sensitive nature of the course content. Further, this pedagogical approach tends to other concerns, including when students enter the class with different levels of skills and have little supervision. Thus, tailoring role-play to align with student needs, yet still exposing them to the content in a safe, structured space is invaluable to student learning. Whether it is acting or watching, role-plays can be helpful to create engagement and connection, while also fostering self-competence and self-efficacy through online learning and supervision.

Further, students reported that engaging with role-plays in the course aligned with their perceived “learning styles.” The authors believe that students utilized this terminology to describe how their learning needs felt met. The phrase “learning styles” commonly used in K-12 education appeared to be etched in many CITs' brains. When CITs used this language, it seemed that they were expressing how their learning needs were met through role-play observations. In line with recent research disproving original beliefs about the existence of “learning styles,” (Willingham et al., 2015) this study seems to suggest that a varied, creative, and engaging approach to teaching

trauma aided all students learning and development. Students named all of the “learning styles” (e.g., kinesthetic, visual, auditory) and reported that the role-play met their respective learning styles. This study's results align with previous educational research suggesting that engaging approaches meet the needs of diverse students.

Limitations and Future Research

Certain limitations may have impacted the results of this research. First, this study took place during one semester and within one trauma, crisis, and grief course. The COVID-19 pandemic further pronounced the unique nature of this setting by forcing the course online mid-semester. Future research conducted in multiple universities, in multiple geographic locations, and over a longer time frame could lead to more generalizable findings. Second, this study focused specifically on CITs' experiences with trauma-specific role-plays although the course also discussed crisis and grief. It is crucial to understand if this pedagogical strategy had similar results with crisis and grief-specific role-plays. Third, one of the researchers was also the professor of the trauma, crisis, and grief course. Despite measures that were in place to assure students of their anonymity, it is still possible that social desirability skewed responses into more favorable recollections of the course. The results of this study are based on students' self-perceptions, also influenced by social desirability. Future research using a mixed-methods approach that includes observations, inclusion of a comparison group, pre and post-interviews, or additional qualitative data sources could support the findings obtained in this study.

Conclusion

Counselor educators should consider the efficacy of experiential learning practices, especially that of role-play, when designing and facilitating counseling courses. Building on the field's existing utilization of role-play, educators may consider integrating role-play into more

specialized counseling courses, including trauma, crisis, and grief counseling, as well as in alternative course delivery formats, such as online and hybrid courses. Participants in this study noted that role-play helped greatly in teaching the abstract concepts of trauma not being black-and-white, but rather, gray. Further, role-plays increased levels of understanding, comfort, and confidence with trauma counseling, as reported by participants.

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