

Students' Experiences Conducting Telehealth Counseling During a Pandemic

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Abstract

In this article, the results of an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis qualitative research study are presented. This study explored the experiences of counselors-in-training learning how to conduct telehealth counseling during their practicum experience. Telehealth counseling was implemented for training due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Results highlighted the five superordinate themes of participants: (1) importance of relationships, (2) emotional awareness; (3) counselor development; (4) belief in counseling; and (5) skill acquisition. Participant quotes are included to convey the essence of their experiences. Following the presentation of results, a discussion with implications and the need for future research is presented.

Keywords

telehealth, COVID-19, counseling, counselor development

Becoming a professional counselor is not an isolated experience, but a lifelong journey (Moss et al., 2014; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). While this journey is unique to each individual, there are common experiences that contribute to the formation of a counselor's professional identity such as experiential learning activities (Furr & Carroll, 2003), involvement with leadership roles (Luke & Goodrich, 2010), reflective journaling (Shuler & Keller-Dupree, 2015), and supervision (Howard et al., 2006). In addition to these common experiences, specific developmental milestones are important to the formation of a professional identity for counselors. Another special consideration in this developmental journey is the setting and method of experiential learning that contributes to this process.

Developmental Models of Counselor Development

Developmental models suggest that there is a distinct trajectory of counseling identity development (e.g., Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Stoltenberg et al., 1998). The Integrated Developmental Model (IDM; Stoltenberg et al., 1998) is recognized by Bernard and Goodyear (2007) as the "best known and most widely used stage developmental model" (p. 90). This model consists of

four distinct phases of development, with beginning counselors-in-training (CITs) recognized at Level 1. This phase is defined by CITs' heightened anxiety and motivation, dependence on their supervisor, and need for structure and positive feedback, among other characteristics (Stoltenberg et al., 1998). This Level 1 of the Stoltenberg et al. (1998) model is similar to the second phase articulated by Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003). This phase is titled the "Beginning Student" phase, and is characterized by vulnerability, apprehension and anxiety, along with the need for positive feedback (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) suggest that the movement from the beginning phase into this second one is often initiated when the student is assigned their first client.

Professional identity development also occurs when specific tasks are completed (Gibson et al., 2011; Moss et al., 2014). Gibson et al. (2010) found that these tasks consist of identifying a personal definition of counseling, taking ownership of the responsibility for their own learning, and appreciating a systemic orientation to the work. Moss et al. (2014) furthered this research and, similar to Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003), found that "work with clients was most meaningful to

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counselors' professional identity development" (p. 8). Working with clients has been found to be instrumental in the identity formulation of CITs, and field placements may involve both positive and negative experiences which can result in growth opportunities for the CIT (Furr & Carroll, 2003) although these negative experiences might be uncomfortable at the time. While it is important to examine all of the educational factors that contribute to the attainment of a professional identity, and the development of the counselor, it is crucial to recognize that just as clients have external factors that influence their in-session outcomes (Lambert, 1992), CITs also do not exist in a bubble of educational experiences.

Personal Life Outside Training Program

Furr and Carroll (2003) found that personal experiences outside of the educational realm impact the experiences of CITs in their training programs. These were mostly reported as interpersonal relationships with significant others, families and friends. There is a dearth of literature related to the impact that current events (e.g., the attacks of September 11, school gun violence, the COVID-19 pandemic, etc.) have on the experiences of CITs and their development. This is relevant to the current time given the pandemic occurring in our global history. In March 2020 the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic, from the novel coronavirus COVID-19, resulting in disruption to training experiences in counselor education programs (Gay & Swank, 2021). It is unknown how this pandemic is influencing the development of CITs during this time.

Training in Telehealth

Due to the unknowns associated with the COVID-19 virus, and the risks of being in close contact with one another, a large number of mental health professionals switched their practices completely to telehealth during the early months of the pandemic (Sampaio et al., 2021). The shift to telehealth occurred for a variety of reasons, such as the shelter-in-place orders that were implemented across the country during March of 2020, and the uncertainty of the virus transmission in those early days. For students in clinical placements during this time, this shift necessitated the need to prepare students for telehealth work in order to be competent and ethical practitioners (American Counseling Association, 2014). The Center for Credentialing and Education (CCE; 2022) recommends training in the following nine areas for professionals seeking certification as a Board Certified-TeleMental Health Provider (BC-TMH): introduction to TMH, presentation skills, HIPAA compliance, best practices in video delivery, crisis planning and protocols, choosing and using technology,

orienting clients, direct-to-consumer TMH, and TMH health settings and care coordination. This list provides the most comprehensive overview of required elements for providing competent telehealth services.

Despite the growth in telehealth and distance counseling services, there is limited research on the experience of counseling students with providing these services early in their training programs. Johnson and Rehuff (2020) conducted a qualitative analysis of counseling students' experiences with a telehealth training. These authors found that students participating in a three-week training experience with telehealth gained an appreciation for the practice specifically due to the ability to increase client access to services, and practicality associated with it. Participants in this study also described some emotional responses to this training experience such as "awkwardness, unsureness, being intimidated, and more confidence at the end" (Johnson & Rehuff, 2020, p. 8). These authors further found that students commented on the need for more training and experience in telehealth, likely due to concerns and challenges the participants reflected on (i.e., ethical concerns, and technology limitations). An early study of counseling students' experiences providing text-based counseling also found limitations associated with technology (i.e., software compatibility and hardware connectivity) impacting the students' experience of service delivery (Haberstroh et al., 2008). As the profession continues to integrate telehealth into the service delivery model, there is a need to explore the training experiences of the counselors-in-training being exposed to this model for the first time.

Current Study

The purpose of this study was to explore practicum students' experiences conducting telehealth counseling to clients in a university counseling lab during a pandemic. The telehealth format was instituted in order for our counseling students to complete their practicum field experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this qualitative study, we sought to explore how students experienced the counseling relationship with their clients, their own self-care, the supervision experience, and any other relevant factors during the academic year. The goal of this study was to hear the voices of the participants as they explored their own thoughts and reactions to the practicum lab experience. To achieve this aim, we conducted semi-structured individual interviews with six students during the fall and spring semesters. We employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the following research question: How do counseling students describe their experiences conducting telehealth counseling to clients during a pandemic?

Method

Research Design

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is an approach used in qualitative research to explore the meanings that participants assign to events and/or experiences. IPA is both phenomenological, in that the researcher aims to understand an experience through the lens of the participant, and hermeneutic, meaning that the researcher engages in theoretical interpretations throughout the analysis process (Smith et al., 2009). Researchers are not only trying to extract the content and meaning from the participant's perspective, they are also trying to capture the ways in which participants responded to questions and make sense of their experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Each case is analyzed several times to identify themes, extract deeper understandings, and to uncover convergent and divergent themes within and between cases (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

IPA is a good fit for this study for several reasons. First, the researchers were interested in exploring the individual perceptions of participants experiencing a phenomenon in a similar context. In accordance with IPA recommendations (Smith & Osborn, 2007), the participants were homogeneous in terms of race, gender, and contextual factors (e.g., enrolled in the same graduate level counseling course, living in the same geographical area). The flexible nature of the IPA semi-structured interview allowed researchers to enter the social and personal world of the participants, uncovering and extracting deeper meanings. Further, the idiographic nature of IPA allowed the researchers to describe individual cases and make specific statements about participants rather than probabilistic inferences (Smith et al., 1995). The data analysis guidelines established by Smith and colleagues (1995) allowed researchers to focus on the complexity and richness of meanings rather than frequency, which aligns with the purpose of this study.

Participants

In alignment with IPA recommendations (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), we recruited a relatively homogeneous sample using purposive sampling. Participants included six graduate students enrolled in the same graduate counseling course at a public university in the rocky mountain region of the United States. Four participants identified as White, one identified as Caucasian, and one identified as European American. Five students identified as female and one identified as male. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 47 years ($M=33$, $SD=9.07$). Four participants were enrolled in the school counseling program and two were enrolled in the addictions counseling program.

Procedures

Participants were recruited from a 60-credit CACREP accredited Master's in Counseling Program in the Northwest. The program offers school and addiction counseling specialty areas. The Counselor Education program is based on a cohort model, enrolling approximately 24 students each year. The participants were enrolled in their required Practicum course during their second year in the program. The Practicum course was traditionally taught within the departmental lab on-site with in-person counseling sessions. However, during the 2020-2021 school year, the lab switched to a virtual, telehealth format. Due to the switch of a virtual lab, students were required to complete a one-credit telehealth counseling course before the fall semester to better understand the legal and ethical obligations of conducting counseling over the internet, or to provide proof of attendance at an approved telehealth training. The Practicum course allows the counseling students to provide counseling to volunteer undergraduate students within the University. The Practicum course spans two semesters.

After Institutional Review Board approval, all of the students in the Practicum course were invited to participate in the research study through the second author, a faculty member who was not involved in the Practicum course or any evaluative component. Students were informed the Practicum lab coordinator (1st author) would not be informed of which students chose to participate. The second author described the purpose of the study, answered questions, and disseminated information to the students. Students were then invited to respond to a follow-up email from the second author if interested in participating.

Data Collection

We utilized semi-structured interviews to gain in-depth first person perspectives of the participants' lived experiences (Larkin & Thompson, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). The first and second authors developed the interview schedule based on a review of the telehealth literature and recommendations by Smith et al. (2009). The interview schedule included seven open-ended questions. The questions were (1) What did you anticipate before participating in Practicum (2) What was the experience like of participating in Practicum this year so far (3) What was the experience of providing telehealth counseling services like for you (4) What was the biggest surprise for you in being in Practicum and/or conducting telehealth counseling (5) What do you wish you knew when you started Practicum (6) What's been your biggest take away from participating in Practicum, and (7) What's been your biggest take away from participating in telehealth counseling? Two research assistants (RAs), trained in qualitative research and interviewing

methods conducted the interviews to increase participants' comfort in sharing freely about what they learned in the class. The RAs had both participated in previous research studies and had conducted interviews.

After students consented, the RAs scheduled interviews that were conducted over Zoom and recorded. The RAs also verbally reviewed the informed consent document with participants prior to obtaining their signature, and then conducted the interview, which lasted from 30 to 50 minutes. The participants were interviewed in late Fall semester (October) and again during late Spring semester (April). The RAs transcribed the interviews and omitted any identifiable information. The transcripts were checked by the participants before being submitted to the second author. At the conclusion of the Spring semester (and after grades were submitted), the transcripts were shared with the first author as well.

Researcher Lens

According to Smith and colleagues (2019), the experiences, perspectives, and values of researchers play a role in the IPA research process. The second author had completed telehealth training in 2018, earned the Board-Certified TeleMental Health Provider credential, taught the telehealth asynchronous elective Summer 2020, and began seeing telehealth private practice clients in Spring 2020. The first author had relatively little experience conducting telehealth counseling sessions prior to the COVID-19 pandemic but had begun conducting her own telehealth counseling sessions with clients in the few months before the 2020-21 school year. She had also taken a telehealth course online. Prior to the beginning of the semester, the first and second author collaborated on a plan to introduce and prepare students for conducting telehealth counseling sessions for their Practicum experience, which was the second author's only involvement in the Practicum experience. The primary bias influencing the researchers reflected the larger literature on telehealth counseling and the difficulty of establishing relationships, dealing with the challenge of technology, and ensuring client privacy. To help minimize this bias, both researchers received training in telehealth counseling, reviewed the literature, and consulted with others who have practiced telehealth counseling in the past. Throughout the analytic process the researchers kept field notes related to thoughts, emotions, or other experiences related to the data. The researchers discussed their reflective analytic experiences together to ensure interpretations were grounded in participants' experiences and not solely on their beliefs and values (Finaly, 2011).

Trustworthiness

The researchers used multiple measures to strive for

trustworthiness in this study. First, the role of the researchers was described, including descriptions of the researchers' biases and the efforts taken to minimize bias through the use of field notes and peer debriefing (Hays, et al., 2016). Second, a description of the participants and their relationship to the researchers, including descriptions of the researchers' efforts to avoid coercion through the use of a non-evaluator for recruitment, GAs for interviewing and anonymous participation for the evaluator. Next, multiple interviews were conducted to help ensure participants' voices were captured. In addition, member checking was used to help establish trustworthiness and to confirm findings. Lastly, the use of numerous direct quotes to create thick descriptions allowed for the voice of the participants to come through across themes (Hays, et al., 2016).

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed according to IPA's six-step framework (Smith et al., 2009). We engaged in multiple readings of the transcripts, attempting to fully immerse themselves with the participants' experiences. We then conducted a first-level analysis, according to Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), consisting of providing exploratory comments and reactions to the participants' experiences and reflections. The comments and reactions were written utilizing the participants' own words as much as possible. Next, the first and second author began to identify potential themes that emerged from the data. During this stage of analysis, we added our own interpretive intention while still bringing attention back to the participant's voice. We analyzed each case at both levels before analyzing the next case.

After we analyzed all twelve cases, we met to review our initial findings and overall impressions of the data. We discussed the codes identified, patterns in the data, and finally, the themes that emerged. We worked together to come to agreement on the patterns, our interpretations, and ultimately, the superordinate and subordinate themes.

Results

Our analysis of the data produced five superordinate themes and eight subordinate themes (see Table 1). The superordinate themes included (1) importance of relationships; (2) emotional awareness; (3) counselor development; (4) belief in counseling; and (5) skill acquisition. These superordinate themes reflected participants' shared perceptions of their experiences in the practicum course and applying their learning to counseling practice. The subordinate themes offer more refined descriptions of the larger themes and provide deeper insight into some of the ways participants experienced the larger themes differently. Particular areas of

Table 1

Superordinate and Subordinate Themes

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
The importance of relationships	The cohort relationship
	The client relationship
	Relationships that allowed for growth and feedback
Emotional awareness	Surprise, you are a telehealth counselor!
	Being a new counselor during a pandemic
	Emotions around technology
Counselor development	
Belief in counseling	
Skill Acquisition	How telehealth counseling enhanced skill development
	How telehealth counseling hindered skill development

divergence included participants' experiences in conducting telehealth counseling, how their development was impacted by a pandemic, and skills acquired (or missed) by being online.

Superordinate Theme #1: The Importance of Relationships

One of the major themes that emerged from participants was the importance of relationships. The relationships discussed were those with the other cohort members, with supervisors, and with clients. All six of the participants acknowledged some aspect of these relationships and the difference it made in their practicum experience. As Taylor stated, "I think the support that I received has been crucial in my growth as a counselor...the support from the program is probably the key ingredient." A common thread throughout the participants' experiences were how relationships became even more important because of the virtual component and engaging in practicum during a pandemic.

Subordinate Theme 1a: The cohort relationship. Five of the six participants commented on the relationship with their cohort and how crucial it was during this experience. Taylor stated, "I could not have survived this semester without the support of my cohort. I literally think this journey has drawn us closer than ever." The ability to check in on each other and gratitude for having spent a year together in-person pre-pandemic was also mentioned by multiple participants. Jamie noted "we've just been checking in a lot which has been really great. I'm glad that we already knew each other for a year so we had a relationship built up." Ellis stated that talking to his cohort helped, "yeah, I'm, I'm glad we got to know each other a year before in person."

The cohort relationship was also valued because of the participants' ability to learn from one another as

well. As Taylor stated, "we have a group chat going and then just reaching out to specific cohort members and asking for advice or bouncing ideas off of one another because I think each cohort member has their own take on things and their insight is really valuable." Skyler also commented on this dynamic, "I think our cohort is really strong. So I don't ever feel weird asking everybody, like what would you guys do in this situation, what would you think about this, you know, getting ideas off each other." Some of the participants also connected their relationships to their own developmental journey. Taylor stated, "being able to rely on each other has been so, so important. I could not have done it without the supportive cohort."

Subordinate Theme 1b: The client relationship. The client-counselor relationship was also mentioned by a majority of the participants. Skyler referenced this idea that both she and her clients had a shared experience of going through a pandemic. She stated, "both of us are experiencing that so that's kind of already a bond that's formed...a few of my clients have had telehealth sessions where they've had covid...so that's something we either have experienced...so it just creates [a] stronger connection." Some of the participants also noted an ease in forming relationships even though they were online. Riley stated, "I feel like I have a really good relationship and even in the second or third sessions, you can just tell how much more open they are." Morgan stated "It was a moment where it was like I'm so glad we already have that connection, and she has a place to just cry."

Other participants also remarked on the impact of telehealth on the relationship with the client, as Morgan stated:

I feel even more, I'm able to see tears, I can see someone that's gone quiet and kind of inward.

Because you're just looking at their face...I think it is an opportunity for counselors to be able to reach more people, and I think that my clients feel more comfortable because they're at their home and they feel more open.

Skyler stated, "I anticipated less vulnerability from clients just because sometimes from behind the screen... but it was way easier I think, to connect with people and to kind of feel that empathy through the screen." Taylor stated, "some clients feel more comfortable doing it this way, you know they're in a safe comfortable familiar place for them."

Subordinate Theme 1c: Relationships that allowed for growth and feedback. Another theme that emerged from the participants was how relationships contributed to counselor growth through feedback. Morgan stated, "just seeing the different ideas out there...and just learning from others' experiences and others' thoughts on those experiences is very helpful for me." Riley stated, "just getting all the feedback, 'Oh, you did this well, you implemented this really nicely' and then also the constructive criticism and hearing other people's perspectives...and getting to watch other people too and learning from their sessions." Skyler also noted how the online format might have hindered relationships, stating, "of course I'm out on that in-person experience and like getting that interaction with live supervisors and even professors. So I think in that sense, it's hindered my learning a little bit."

Superordinate Theme #2: Emotional Awareness. The next major theme that emerged related to the participants' emotional awareness. The many emotions expressed by the students ranged from nervousness, unease, and frustration to satisfaction, surprise, and gratitude. The subordinate themes related to feelings about counseling online, counseling during a pandemic, and using technology. As Jamie stated it was, "stressful!"

Subordinate theme #2a: Surprise, you are a telehealth counselor! Many of the responses stemmed from the sudden switch to a telehealth counseling format, an unexpected result of working through a pandemic. Jamie stated:

so that was definitely disappointing at first. I just didn't know what to expect with everything being online and thought it would be even more nerve wracking than being in person with a live supervisor and just feeling that it wasn't going to be the same experience.

Morgan stated, "we were all worried. Our supervisors kept saying, 'it's going to be okay, don't worry. We will

work with you,' but . . .how are we supposed to do this?" Ellis stated, "I just resigned myself to, I'm going to be scared going into it and hopefully coming out of that I'm going to be better."

Subordinate Theme #2b: Being a new counselor during a pandemic. A few of the participants commented on their feelings related to the uncertainty of counseling clients for the first time. Skyler stated, "just feeling nervousness and not confident, like imposter syndrome, maybe qualified to be doing what I'm doing." Riley stated, "I was so nervous...the first time I was ever going to counsel somebody...as the session went on, you got more comfortable doing it over a screen." Taylor stated, "I was worried about the barriers that we would face just not being able to be in person and see you know pick up on the body language of clients." Some participants remarked on their feelings related to a transition to in-person sessions later. Jamie stated, "I'm sure it's going to be a whole different set of nerves that goes into actual in-person sessions." Skyler stated, "I feel like the first time I see a client in person I'm going to have all the same feelings of being super nervous and feeling maybe a little bit more of the imposter syndrome." Taylor stated, "I think that'll be a whole other set of anxieties that will be dealing with when we move back into person because we've never done that before."

A few of the participants talked specifically about their feelings related to counseling through a pandemic. Ellis stated, "[COVID] added a lot more stress, not just to like the counselors and everything, but also to the [clients]." Taylor stated:

I feel like COVID has taken part of this experience from me and it's frustrating...and I feel like that whole experience has been taken from us, which is really sad but...it actually added more things to talk about with clients.

Ellis stated, "I think it's central to my practicum experience, it's changed every expectation and [it] has been the central theme, I guess among all my clients is this pandemic anxiety...this just changed the game completely."

Subordinate Theme #2c: Emotions around technology. A majority of responses from many participants related to frustration with technology. Ellis stated, "I think it was challenging for both the client and myself because there was a lot of tech issues that we were trying to navigate and connectivity issues." Skyler stated, "[it's] been sort of a downfall just because sometimes the screen goes glitchy and you can't see the client and sometimes it drops off." Taylor stated, "a lot of the stress stemmed from at first, making sure that we had all the technology setup." Ellis stated, "but there

are those unfortunate times when someone's getting pretty deep and talking about their emotions and I'm like yeah so I just missed the last minute, could you please repeat."

Some participants also expressed some positives with the experience of counseling clients and being online. Skyler stated, "I was kind of really nervous about that (being online) and I didn't know how that was going to go but I've been pleasantly surprised, you can still be in the moment with somebody." Multiple participants remarked on the benefits of conducting sessions online. Ellis stated, "it's so much easier to sit where you're at, log onto the computer." Skyler stated, "I come home from work, I'm not driving back and forth to campus . . . you just get to do it from the comfort of your home."

Superordinate Theme #3: Counselor Development.

The next theme that emerged from the participants' experiences related to their development as counselors. Jamie stated, "definitely a lot of growth from the beginning of the semester through the end. I feel much more comfortable in session with clients." The practicum experience is the students' first chance to apply the knowledge and skills they acquired during the previous year of didactic coursework with real clients. Much of a counselor's development occurs through the lessons learned during their practicum experience. Many of the participants remarked on the lessons and take-aways they had during the year. Skyler stated, "I don't have to be an expert right now... it's okay to feel like maybe I didn't do things totally right...learning to accept those little hiccups." Similarly, Jamie stated, "what I struggled so much with at the beginning of the semester was feeling like there's a way that you should be a counselor...just feeling like I wasn't doing what I was supposed to be doing." Skyler stated, "it's okay to feel like you made mistakes...this is the time to explore and to try on different hats and see what feels good."

Other participants focused on what they learned about the client. Skyler stated, "my biggest aha moment was realizing that not all clients are going to present themselves fully at the beginning and stories may change." Jamie stated, "feel comfortable knowing who's supposed to be doing the work... if you feel you're putting in a lot of work in your sessions then, maybe re-evaluate your process." Ellis stated, "every session is going to look different, everything was going to be shaped by you and the client, mostly the client." Lastly, many participants learned lessons they will take with them into their future work as counselors. Morgan learned, "I can do this and I can say that I'm no expert but...I can do this!" Taylor stated, "it's really taught me that I can roll with the punches and be flexible and I

can do hard things because this program has challenged me in ways I didn't even know it was possible." Morgan stated, "it was interesting for me to know that even just the skills alone, that's the key. That's my aha like, oh, I can do this." Taylor stated:

...just learning to sit with a client for 50 minutes, being able to do that and trust that you can, that was scary to think about coming into this, but realizing that you have the tools, you have the knowledge, you have the capacity to do that within yourself and just growing these skills and trusting that has been something huge that I've taken away.

Superordinate Theme #4: Belief in Counseling.

The fourth theme that emerged was the participants' belief in the counseling process. Through the practicum experience, the counseling students were able to see the change process in their clients which affirmed their belief in the power of counseling. Ellis stated, "I just like counseling, like listening to people and hearing their stories and sharing their experience and watching them work through everything and coming out and, in most cases, coming out better afterwards." Similarly, Jamie stated, "the main focus is to hold space for your clients and that's all really more powerful than you think." Riley stated:

I think the big surprise for me is the ability to use simple skills of listening and having an impact. I didn't know that's the basis for counseling. We talked about and we learned the skills, but it's like can I really help someone...it's exciting.

For all of the participants, the counseling process was affected by both being online and providing this service during a pandemic. Riley stated, "I think it's really cool that in this profession, you can still be able to do that and help people, especially in such a trying time." Some of the participants noted the effects of the pandemic on clients' wellbeing. Jamie stated, "isolation or being online or lack of social interaction has affected clients, I think it's affected it a lot. And it's also something... it's a lesson in resilience and going with the flow and working through hard times."

Many of the participants noted how the counseling process worked while being online. Jamie stated, "talking about how it feels to be online, how it feels to be in this space and how different it is than normal circumstances." Skyler stated, "it made a lot of clients more comfortable because they probably wouldn't have been as comfortable having to come in or come on campus. So I think that there is a time and place for it." Taylor stated, "I never expected that sessions would be able to get very deep and personal for clients because you're over a screen, but there's been some serious breakthroughs with clients that I've had." Riley stated, "we've had a lot more clients coming to

counseling because of the pandemic and just getting to see that other side of why and what different situations were like for different people during this time.”

Superordinate Theme #5: Skill Acquisition. The final theme to emerge from the data was the participants’ experience with acquiring counseling skills during their practicum experience. Five of the six participants noted some aspect of skill development and how this affected their ability to counsel others. Some comments were more general in nature, for example, Riley stated, “I didn’t think that I would gain as much confidence as I had throughout the semester.” Also, Taylor stated, “I feel like I strengthened my foundational counseling skills for sure, I feel more comfortable.” Others were more specific, for example, Skyler stated, “planning ahead and reviewing notes before you go into session with someone is really important and...and maybe helps connect with things.”

Subordinate theme 5a: How telehealth counseling enhanced skill development. Many of the participants commented on the skills they acquired in conducting telehealth counseling sessions. Skyler stated, “I’ve still gained the skills that I needed to gain and we’re still interacting with supervisors, just in a different format, so I don’t think it’s a bad thing. I am enjoying it.” Many of them recognized that these skills may be unique to counseling online and how this potentially differs from what they may do when counseling in person as the following quote highlights:

it also makes me pay more attention to tone of voice, to eye contact, to the non-verbals that you get, or just the effect of a client that you can see even though you can’t see body language, you can still get a pretty good picture. . . I think that I’ve increased recognizing more immediacy-kind of skills. (Jamie)

Taylor stated, “I was really surprised by how comfortable I got with reading the body language of clients from [the chest] up.”

Jamie also recognized how telehealth had changed other skills in her practice, stating that she was “doing multiple check-ins and using immediacy as much as possible.” Skyler stated:

now I feel like I’m much more willing to laugh or lean in or do more motions with clients over the screen, and so I think that’s another way that I’m trying to be more present and authentic over the screen.

Skyler stated, “I really don’t ever look away from the client I just feel really engaged and I try to put myself as if I’m in the room with them. And so I think that helps.” Taylor stated:

It’s still possible to be able to relay empathy [with] those attending skills and be able to make that

connection with the client...I think that it’s provided me with a skill set that will be really useful in the future. The future is technology based.

Subordinate theme 5b: How telehealth counseling hindered skill development. Many participants noted positive skill development due to conducting telehealth sessions but a few of them also commented on the barriers within this modality. Ellis stated, “I’m not gonna get as big [of] a feel on the non-verbals. So I really [have] to pay attention to the verbal. I’m not going to see a lot of body language.” Taylor stated, “I do feel like my experience with telehealth has hindered some of the techniques that I’m able to practice with clients. For example, anything having to do with play therapy or sand tray.” And lastly, one participant noted how conducting sessions within her home created a lack of separation. Skyler stated, “it is hard to keep boundaries if after a session you’re like (sigh) ‘that was heavy’...if I was in a separate place, I could have that time to reflect quietly, not in a house full of people.”

Discussion

Results of this study highlight important considerations for students in their first practicum counseling experience. With the onset of a pandemic, changes were made to accommodate students’ progression through a counseling program, however many of the common elements of an in-person practicum experience remained the same despite switching to telehealth counseling. In addition, benefits of learning about and conducting telehealth sessions were noted by each of the participants. Though there was variance in the participants’ experience and comfort with conducting counseling sessions online, each of the participants were able to identify how this experience contributed to their development as a counselor.

All of the participants remarked on the importance of relationships over the two semesters. These relationships were an essential aspect of their development. As outlined in both the IDM and Rønnestad and Skovholt’s models, levels of anxiety and uncertainty are pervasive during a beginning CIT’s experience with a need for reassurance and support from peers and supervisors. The participants described the support they received from their peers and supervisors as a significant contributor to their academic development and emotional well-being, most likely intensified by being online and matriculating during a pandemic. The opportunity to reflect on the counseling experience, coupled with COVID-19 and interacting virtually, was a dominant piece of the participants’ learning and defined their practicum experience.

However, it may be the experience of learning to be a counselor during a pandemic that may have also

contributed to the CITs' strong beliefs in the counseling process at the completion of their practicum experience. As noted in many of the developmental models, new counselors-in-training often doubt their abilities to sit in sessions with clients and/or that the counseling process will really work. Yet, all of the participants were able to discuss and recognize how their sessions impacted their clients through authentic connections, emotional processing, and deep work. Many of them noted, often with surprise and gratitude, that their clients had made changes and improved during their time together. The CITs reported a felt sense of accomplishment and pride that they were able to be part of this process, especially with the unanticipated expectations of conducting sessions online. They remarked on the development of skills, especially those related to telehealth and the importance of ethical considerations. However, similar to Haberstroh and colleagues' (2008) study, the participants were also frustrated with issues associated with technology. The predominant negative emotions highlighted by the participants were related to connectivity issues that impacted the students' experiences of service delivery. However, the participants were also able to acknowledge that telehealth counseling is most likely here to stay and the skills developed during the year will be beneficial in the future.

Lastly, a final aspect of the participants' development as evidenced through this study was related to the formation of their professional identity. In comparison to clients' experiences noted by Lambert (1992), CITs are influenced by external factors- not just their educational experiences in their attainment of a counseling identity. This could not have been more apparent during a year in which there was a sudden switch to telehealth counseling, a COVID-19 pandemic, among other significant events unfolding in our nation's history (e.g., racial unrest). This impacted not only the CITs and their clients, but also their families and communities. The CITs had to wrestle with these challenging issues on both a personal and professional level, with little experience to draw from. However, all of the participants were able to express a sense of accomplishment and growth at the end of the year. Many of the CITs articulated that through their relationships, skill development, and experiences conducting telehealth counseling over a year, that they were ready and excited to move on to the next phase in their developmental journey of becoming professional counselors.

Implications

The practicum experience is a pivotal point in a student's development as a professional counselor. Results of this study highlight the importance of relationship-building on the developing counselor. The

relationships that are built with peers, supervisors, and clients are instrumental in a CIT's motivation, self-efficacy, and determination, especially with the additional factors of conducting telehealth counseling sessions and living through a pandemic. Counseling programs would benefit from placing importance on the development of these relationships prior to the practicum experience, especially when using a virtual format. Supervisors should spend time having students build rapport within the practicum space, even if previously acquainted, as the practicum experience comes with a new set of roles and expectations.

It is through the practicum experience that CITs further develop their professional identity and belief in the counseling process. Training programs that provide opportunities for students to process their reactions to clients, reflect on their skills, and recognize the change that can happen in sessions, are more likely to facilitate learning. Counselor educators and supervisors also acknowledge that there are sometimes moments of discomfort for CITs and recognize this as part of the learning process. Providing multiple opportunities to process and reflect, and in a variety of formats gives CITs the time and space needed to allow for this growth.

In addition, with the rise in telehealth counseling, many training programs may want to consider adding telehealth training into their curriculum- even if they do not use telehealth for their practicum/internship courses. If programs include content related to telehealth counseling, it would be important to cover areas such as: ethical considerations (e.g., ACA Ethics Code Section H, HIPAA/HITECH compliance), skills specific to virtual counseling, and technology trouble-shooting.

Limitations and Future Research

In evaluating students' experiences conducting telehealth counseling within this study, there are some limitations to address and consider when reviewing the findings. First, there was the potential for participant bias and although the study was conducted after grades were submitted, participants may have felt obligated to participate or report generally more positive experiences based on being students in our program. The use of a research assistant to conduct the interviews may have helped with this limitation, although it may not have eliminated social desirability bias. Second, though two interviews were conducted, a follow-up interview (six months or later after the experience was completed) may have provided another opportunity for participants to provide further reflection and insight on their experience that deepened the analysis. A final consideration would be incorporating the use of reflective journaling for participants that may have allowed them another avenue to document their thoughts and

feelings during the practicum experience and allowed researchers another method to explore, adding to the richness of the data. When considering future studies, one area to consider would be an evaluation of the client's experience participating in telehealth counseling. Lastly, a quantitative study that examines the experiences of counselors in multiple settings and with more diverse populations could be beneficial.

Conclusion

The complex process of learning to be a counselor involves a significant amount of learning opportunities. The first practicum experience generally is an intense time of learning and developing the identity as a professional counselor. Participants in this study reflected on their experience in practicum, learning the new modality of telehealth during the global pandemic. Participants emphasized the importance of relationships during this process, having awareness of their own emotional responses, and gaining a belief in the process along with honing skills all while developing their identities as counselors. Future research exploring the impact of current events on counseling training will provide valuable insight into external factors contributing to the attainment of the identity as a professional counselor.

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