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### **Braving the Sea Change: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study of How Counselors-In-Training Experience Their Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Relationships**

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

BRAVING THE SEA CHANGE: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL  
STUDY OF HOW COUNSELORS-IN-TRAINING EXPERIENCE THEIR  
INTERPERSONAL AND INTRAPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Christopher Jess Ward

College of Education and Behavioral Sciences  
Department of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education  
Counselor Education and Supervision

December 2022

This Dissertation by: Christopher Jess Ward

Entitled: *Braving the Sea Change: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study of How Counselors-in-Training Experience Their Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Relationships*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Education and Behavioral Science, Department of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education, Program of Counselor Education and Supervision.

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## ABSTRACT

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This interpretive phenomenological analysis asked counselors-in-training (CITs) to reflect on their connections with important others and with themselves, noting any changes which took place within said relationships over the course of counselor training. Seven CITs provided rich narratives around relational shifts and personal/professional development, bringing to the surface superordinate themes of (a) Insecurity and Confusion, (b) Growing Pains, and (c) Overcoming and Resilience. Superordinate themes were further divided into the following sub-themes: Insecurity and Confusion: Professional/Personal Identity Integration, Mental Health and Responsibility, Reassurance; Growing Pains: Relationship Imbalanced and Disequilibrium, Loneliness; Overcoming and Resilience: Ruptures and Repairs, Outright Benefits, Self-Prioritization. These themes, and the narratives they were gleaned from, demonstrated both the hardships and the triumphs of the training process. Although many CITs reported experiencing relational benefits in connection with counselor training, there was a pervasive understanding that the changes they went through inter- and intrapersonally were challenging, demanding, and, at times, pivotal. This dissertation endeavors to present evidence of all findings through participants' own words, remaining faithful to the phenomenological nature of the study and giving voice to the CIT experience. These research findings contribute to the larger body of literature around how counselor training impacts trainees, as well as how CITs can better prepare

themselves and program faculty/staff can better support students while they progress through counselor training.

Keywords: Counselor, training, identity, development, interpersonal relationships, personal growth

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Graduate education is advanced academic learning which extends beyond the undergraduate degree. The assumption of graduate education is that the academic demands exceed those of undergraduate education and include emphases on research, depth of study, and teaching. Advanced graduate education is stressful for students due to numerous factors, including requisite balancing of academic, financial, and social obligations (Kirby et al., 2004). Counselors-in-training (CITs) face the same challenges as graduate students in non-counseling programs, as well as challenges unique to counseling programs. Murray and Kleist (2011) noted that in addition to the typical expectations of academic and professional development held by other educational programs, students pursuing graduate programming in counselor education are expected to grow and develop personally. This personal growth is a product of counselor training wherein “students explore their value systems and patterns of relating” (p. 122). In fact, personal development is considered a necessary component of counselor training (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1995). Personal growth and development are seen to play fundamental roles in counselor competency, without which clients are potentially put at risk (Frame & Stevens-Smith, 1995; Lumadue & Duffey, 1999). The counselor’s use of “self” in the counseling relationship is considered a “critical tool” in the delivery of effective counseling and demands an appropriate level of self-awareness on the counselor’s part (Pieterse et al., 2013, p. 190). Without an appropriate level of self-awareness, a counselor may inadvertently cause client harm.



## **Background of the Problem**

Individuals do not enter counseling programs inherently prepared to be counselors. At the heart of counselor education is an understanding that not all individuals embody the personal qualities requisite to become successful counselors. As a result, counseling programs perform gate-keeping activities to protect stakeholders, which include students, counseling programs, the counseling profession, and clients (Brear et al., 2008). Personal characteristics are a preliminary qualifier in counselor education admittance, but even upon acceptance students are expected to develop significantly prior to degree completion. Students are mandated to acquire knowledge, skills, self-/other-awareness, and to grow personally. Naslund (2015) stated “training to be a counselor is more than developing academically and professionally, counselors-in-training must also grow and develop personally”; essentially, students are required to change (p. 1). CITs develop personally and professionally as they progress through their counseling programs. Counseling coursework targets many areas of student growth such as enhanced cognitive complexity, empathy, open-mindedness, and personal/interpersonal awareness. Through small group experiences, multicultural education, self-reflection activities, personal counseling theory development, clinical experiences, and interaction with peers, instructors, and supervisors, students gain knowledge and develop increased intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness (Atkins et al., 2017; Chao et al., 2011; Ieva et al., 2009; Lim, 2008; Woodside et al., 2007). This knowledge and increased awareness contribute to intrinsic student growth.

Theoretically, the counselor as a person and as a professional are deemed to be entwined and inextricable. Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) described professional development as a life-time process that “involves an increasing higher order integration of the professional self and the personal self” (p. 27). Souders (2009) went further, stating how the nature of “life experiences,

personality traits, and intra-/interpersonal relationships” influence all facets of a counselor’s existence, making personal and professional elements indivisible (p. 123).

C. M. Miller et al. (2020) characterized counselors’ work and personal life as a “reciprocal relationship” in which one influences the other, where both positive and negative conditions “spillover” in “bidirectional ways” (p. 385). A similar view can be taken of the impact of counselor training upon CITs’ personal lives in which the process of training and the rigors of academia impact interpersonal relationships. Murray and Kleist (2011) expressed how counselor education urges CIT growth and change without students necessarily understanding the possible repercussions upon CIT couples’ relationships. Counselor training leads to students developing awareness of personal relationships, recognition of family of origin patterns, and a deeper scrutiny of their romantic relationships, contributing to CIT instituting intrapersonal and interpersonal change in said dynamics to address their needs and desires (Murray & Kleist, 2011). Dahl et al. (2010) stressed the broad impact of training future counselors in terms of what interpersonal relationships students bring with them into the program (i.e., dynamics with friends, spouses, families of origin, children). The authors described this tendency toward impact as a “kind of ‘butterfly effect’ of psychotherapy training on those who are in significant relationships” with CITs.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Furr and Carroll (2003) stated, “it has been observed that students studying to be counselors change as they progress through the educational process” (p. 483). Murray and Kleist (2011) noted that personal change led students to enact interpersonal change. A preponderance of counselor education literature focuses on student change through the lens of professional development with little attention paid to the broader influence of counselor training upon the

interpersonal relationships of CITs. Researchers have acknowledged limited literature regarding the impact of counselor training on these dynamics (Dahl et al., 2010; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Murray & Kleist, 2011; Sori et al., 1996). Existing research was confined to couples and family therapy (CFT) and explored only the impact of counselor training upon spouses, failing to attend to the broader student social impact. This was relevant due to the role family, friends, faculty, and colleagues played in supporting the personal and professional development of CITs, as articulated by Souders (2009):

As counselor trainees study and reflect upon human behavior and relationship dynamics, they may begin to evaluate their past or current relationships, and use that information to facilitate their empathy and understanding their clients' relationship challenges.

Counselor trainees may enhance both their personal and professional development through reflection about their friends and family relationships. (p. 133)

Due to the dearth of literature regarding the impact of counselor training upon student interpersonal relationships, counselor educators were often ill-equipped to support student needs. Furthermore, without adequate information and guidance being provided by educators, students seemed to remain unaware and unprepared to navigate potential interpersonal relationship changes.

Counselor educators may benefit from enhanced awareness of interpersonal relationship changes potentially experienced by CITs and precipitated by counselor training. A more robust understanding of possible relationship impacts throughout the course of counselor training may compel educators to support students more effectively in both anticipating and weathering shifts in CIT relational dynamics. Openly addressing the broader impact of counselor education upon students will bring the conversation into the classroom, normalizing experiences and allowing

CITs the opportunity to fortify one another and receive faculty support. Further, with a greater depth of knowledge regarding the impact of counselor training upon students' interpersonal relationships "counselor educators and supervisors can foresee possible challenges for students and establish educational structures to best support and retain students" (Murray & Kleist, 2011, p. 122).

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study intended to explore CITs' experience of counselor training, a rigorous academic endeavor which promotes personal and professional development and leads to personal change. This study sought to gain more information and a greater understanding of how this personal change influenced CITs' interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, this study examined what elements of developing counselor identity contribute to change if and when CITs' interpersonal relationships experience change.

### **Research Question**

This study sought to answer the following primary:

- Q1 How does counselor education training impact/influence the interpersonal relationships of counselors-in-training (CITs)?

### **Significance of the Study**

Counseling researchers have called for further research exploring the impact of counselor training upon student interpersonal relationships (Dahl et al., 2010; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Murray & Kleist, 2011). Researchers have acknowledged there was limited literature regarding the impact of counselor training upon student interpersonal relationships (Dahl et al., 2010; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Murray & Kleist, 2011; Sori et al., 1996). This study sought to expand knowledge, awareness, and understanding around how CITs experience interpersonal relationship change throughout their counselor identity development. The elements of student personal and

professional development which lead to interpersonal relationship changes were examined. By exploring CITs' interpersonal relationship changes as they result from counselor training, counselor educators, supervisors, and students could better understand this phenomenon. This study created a greater knowledge base on this topic, generating increased awareness for CITs and counselor educators. Such an advance in awareness could support students in their anticipation and then weathering of potential shifts in personal relationship dynamics. Broaching such subjects in the CIT classroom could help to normalize the experience and thereby allow CITs the opportunity to seek and receive support. Along similar lines, counselor educators' and supervisors' awareness of and attention to potential interpersonal relationship challenges could help establish educational structures to better assist CITs.

### **Assumptions**

Because of the subjective nature of qualitative research and the impossibility in separating the qualitative researcher from the research itself, it is imperative that the research process remain as transparent as possible (Hunt, 2011). This subjectivity was mitigated by the researcher stating their assumptions and bias, maintaining a reflexive and responsive stance with regards to findings, and faithfully representing participant narratives (Morrow, 2005). In an effort to promote rigor and transparency, it was important that I, as the researcher, deliberately endeavored to address my personal preconceptions, values, beliefs, and personal experiences with an awareness to how the research process was influenced by such biases.

As a counseling student myself, I had a first-hand understanding of the challenges associated with counseling training, personal growth, and professional identity development. I had personal investment in and opinions around my own narratives in experiencing interpersonal relationship change as it related to my counseling training and subsequent personal/professional

growth. I noticed within myself bias regarding counselor identity development's impact on interpersonal relationships. Based on my own experience, my assumption was that counselor training fosters interpersonal relationship development in both positive and negative directions. What literature is available on this subject largely reflects beneficial, relationship-strengthening interpersonal change but is largely limited to spousal relationships. This study endeavored to examine a broader social context of student interpersonal relationships and was not confined to romantic partnerships.

Research has shown that CITs go through a process of intimate partner relationship reassessment as a result of counselor training in which the relationship is evaluated in terms of whether the dynamic satisfactorily meets desires and expectations. In these instances, increased awareness has led to students making intrapersonal and interpersonal change to address their needs and desires within their relationships (Murray & Kleist, 2011). My personal experience was similar in that following personal change prompted by my counselor education, friend and family relationships became difficult, uncomfortable, and awkward, almost chafing. I became a square peg trying to fit into a round hole. I found myself reexamining my interpersonal relationships, as the research described, to assess whether maintaining these relationships was worth the effort required. Conversely, I believe my friends and family may have been going through a similar process. My way of being had changed, I sought to deepen conversations and was bolder in addressing difficult topics, both of which made others uncomfortable. Generally, it might be said I became dissatisfied with superficial interactions. This experience was reflected in my pilot version of the current study (Ward & Hamilton, 2018) in which participants described a process of assessing relationships held prior to counselor training to determine whether the

energy invested in maintaining the relationship was worth what was gained, a process the authors termed “pruning.”

Acknowledging this bias, I sought to bridle my own opinions and perspectives of the counselor training process, personal/professional development, and counselor identity development as these related to CIT interpersonal relationships to ensure that participant experiences, and not my own, shaped this study. I endeavored to step aside so that the voices of students would be heard, and their experiences were represented honestly and accurately. I monitored my personal preconceptions, values, beliefs, and personal experiences with an awareness to how the research process could be influenced by bias and maintained rigor and transparency throughout the research process so that the reader would determine that the findings of this study were authentic.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Due to the idiographic quality of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), participants were limited in number, a factor which impacted transferability (R. M. Miller et al., 2018). The primary and most broad limitation was that all participants must have experienced the phenomenon being explored. The participant must have been (at the time of recruitment) a current counselor education student at an institution accredited by The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) or CACREP equivalent counseling training program, seeking a master’s, and, due to the researcher’s limitations, verbally proficient in the English language. CACREP-accreditation or CACREP equivalent training was included to help support consistency of education, training, and clinical experience on the part of CIT participants. Counselor education graduates were excluded from this study in order to refine the sample to individuals currently experiencing the rigors of programming and their potential for

impact on present interpersonal relationships with important others. The immediacy and currency of these potential changes were both essential to the study's outcome.

### **Definitions of Terms**

*Cognitive Complexity.* “The state or quality of a thought process that involves numerous constructs, with many interrelationships among them. Such processing is often experienced as difficult or effortful” (VandenBos & American Psychological Association, 2015, p. 203).

*Cognitive Development.* “The growth and maturation of thinking processes of all kinds, including perceiving, remembering, concept formation, problem solving, imagining, and reasoning” (VandenBos & American Psychological Association, 2015, p. 203).

*Counselor.* “An individual professionally trained in counseling, psychology, social work, or nursing who specializes in one or more counseling areas, such as vocational, rehabilitation, educational, substance abuse, marriage, relationship, or family counseling. A counselor provides professional evaluations, information, and suggestions designed to enhance the client's ability to solve problems, make decisions, and effect desired changes in attitude and behavior” (VandenBos & American Psychological Association, 2015, p. 259).

*Counselor-in-Training (CIT).* A student in a master's degree counseling program.

*Counselor Training.* The process through which a master's degree counseling program prepares a student to become a counselor.

*Empathy.* The “understanding a person from his or her frame of reference rather than one's own, or vicariously experiencing that person's feelings, perceptions, and thoughts. Empathy does not, of itself, entail motivation to be of assistance, although it may turn into



sympathy or personal distress, which may result in action. In psychotherapy, therapist empathy for the client can be a path to comprehension of the client's cognitions, affects, motivations, or behaviors" (VandenBos & American Psychological Association, 2015, p. 365).

*Groupthink.* A "strong concurrence-seeking tendency that interferes with effective group decision making" (VandenBos & American Psychological Association, 2015, p. 475).

*Interpersonal Relationship.* The "connections and interactions, especially ones that are socially and emotionally significant, between two or more people" (VandenBos & American Psychological Association, 2015, p. 555).

*Interpersonal Awareness.* "Awareness of both communicated and received interpersonal messages, as well as their understanding of their impact on interpersonal relationships" (Kivlighan et al., 2019, p. 65).

*Intrapersonal Awareness.* *See self-awareness*

*Multicultural Education.* "a progressive approach to education that emphasizes social justice, equality in education, and understanding and awareness of the traditions and language of other cultures and nationalities. Multicultural programs involve two or more ethnic or cultural groups and are designed to help participants define their own ethnic or cultural identity and to appreciate that of others. The purpose is to promote inclusiveness and cultural pluralism in society" (VandenBos & American Psychological Association, 2015, p. 674).

*Open-Mindedness.* "A personality trait reflecting a relative lack of dogmatism" (VandenBos & American Psychological Association, 2015, p. 734).

*Personal Change.* For the purposes of this study, this term will be defined as the combined alterations in a CIT's behavior, attributes/characteristics, and perspective; personal change encompasses the following three terms: *personal growth*, *personal development*, and *professional development* (see corresponding definitions in this section)

*Personal Development.* "An aspect of personal change that is purposeful, structured and specific, a planned measurable change that seeks to develop specific skills and qualities focused on enhancing a trainee's professional effectiveness" (Naslund, 2015, p. 2).

*Personal Growth.* "An aspect of personal change that is unstructured, non-specific, and holistic, a retrospective awareness of change that is not planned, but results from experience and personal development" (Naslund, 2015, p. 2).

*Professional Development.* "The process of acquiring knowledge and skills (e.g., employing counseling techniques, understanding ethical and legal guidelines); it can be developed through various training methods (e.g., coursework, internship). The acquisition of counselor professional development is a process that is often parallel and interchangeable with their personal development as many of the skills associated with effective counseling (e.g., empathy, self-awareness, critical thinking) are also personal characteristics" (Souders, 2009, p. 7).

*Self-Awareness.* "A state of being conscious of one's thoughts, feelings, beliefs, behaviors and attitudes, and knowing how these factors are shaped by important aspects of one's developmental and social history" (Pieterse et al., 2013, p. 191).

*Therapist.* for the purpose of this study the term therapist and counselor are used interchangeably.

## **Conclusion**

Counselor education acknowledges the need for CITs to develop personally and professionally to ensure counselor competence and thereby protecting client welfare (Frame & Stevens-Smith, 1995; Lumadue & Duffey, 1999; Sue et al., 1992; Wilkins, 1997). This development contributes to student personal growth and interpersonal change (Dahl et al., 2010; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Murray & Kleist, 2011). Despite this awareness, there is limited literature regarding the impact of counselor training upon student interpersonal relationships (Dahl et al., 2010; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Murray & Kleist, 2011; Sori et al., 1996). Without a thorough understanding of the influence of counselor training on student interpersonal relationships, both CITs and the counselor educators responsible for fostering their growth are unprepared for potential student relationship challenges and changes. With an enhanced understanding of interpersonal growth related to students progressing through their counseling programs, counselor educators and supervisors could institute and reinforce educational structures to better support students in addressing these challenges (Murray & Kleist, 2011).

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

There has existed a plethora of counselor education research addressing counseling student professional development (i.e., Irving & Williams, 1999; Naslund, 2015; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Wilkins, 1997). Within this body of literature, researchers have thoroughly identified areas of CIT development to ensure comprehensive counselor competency. The focus of this competency is to increase counselor effectiveness and to protect client welfare (Souders, 2009). Woven into counselor professional development is a recognition of the necessity of student personal growth (American Counseling Association, 2014; Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2015). Researchers agree the two concepts are interdependent in that professional development promotes personal growth and without personal growth, professional development is impeded (Frame & Stevens-Smith, 1995; Irving & Williams, 1999; Lumadue & Duffey, 1999; O'Leary et al., 1994; Souders, 2009; Wilkins, 1997). Counselor educators initiate professional development among CITs via several avenues, including self-reflection papers and experiential activities with the goal of enhancing counseling skills, cognitive complexity, empathy, open-mindedness, and intrapersonal/interpersonal awareness to name a few.

The objectives of counselor professional development are well documented, however, the impact of personal growth upon the CIT produced by this personal and professional development is less well known (Dahl et al., 2010; Murray, & Kleist, 2011). Most research in this area addressed personal growth as it relates to professional development, which is

both understandable and well justified, but the question of broader impacts of personal change among CITs was left wanting. This study focused on the question of student personal change resulting from counselor training and what was the impact of this change upon students' interpersonal relationships.

This chapter first will provide a review of counselor training literature as it pertains to professional development and how this education contributes to personal change, followed by the expectation of student growth on the part of instructors due to the necessity of personal change in the building of competent counselors. Second, the elements of coursework which lend to personal change will be described. Lastly, this chapter will illustrate how CITs incorporate counselor skills into personal relationships and how this behavior, combined with personal change, influences students' interpersonal relationships.

### **Personal Growth, Personal Development, and Professional Development**

To further this conversation, it is important to first clarify the terminology of *personal development* compared to *personal growth* which counseling literature often uses interchangeably. Irving and Williams (1999) highlighted and differentiated the uses of the terms *professional development*, *personal development*, and *personal growth*. The authors discussed the aforementioned terms, provided working definitions of *personal development* and *personal growth*, and argued the widespread misuse of the latter term. Counseling literature has commonly used *personal development* and *personal growth* as synonymous terms, and although the terms have many similarities it would be improper to use them interchangeably. The distinction in terminology exists in the conveyance of meaning revealed through linguistic analysis. Both contain ideas pertaining to “‘becoming’ and of acquiring knowledge, skills and understandings, yet the concepts are different in a number of important ways” (Irving &

Williams, 1999, p. 517). When looking at “development” and “growth” separate from the qualifier of “personal,” it was understood that “development” encapsulated all the elements of growth and then some. This distinction becomes apparent in the terms linguistics uses. Whereas “development can be planned and structured; goals can be defined, and progress checked; criteria can be met and end-points achieved”; growth does not possess these same qualities (Irving & Williams, 1999, p.518). In comparison, growth is ongoing and does not have a point of terminus. The distinction is clarified by looking at language use, illustrated by these examples: “[I]t is acceptable to say, ‘I am seeking to develop my potential’, but not to say ‘I am seeking to grow my potential’: I can develop my personal resources but not grow them” (Irving & Williams, 1999, p. 518). Growth was a vague term in that it does not capture the notion of what or how, but rather indicates the person holistically. Development entailed specifics.

According to the above-mentioned authors, growth could occur as a byproduct of personal development, due to developmental experiences and individual work. An important distinction was present in that personal growth was not realized while actively engaged in the process but rather was recognized in hindsight. This differed from development in that progress could be recognized by achieving goals and reaching development milestones. Growth and development were similar in that both concepts indicated movement and were progressively directional, however, growth marked movement in a positive direction that was deemed permanent. Additionally, “growth always implies a value of judgement,” meaning growth is the attainment of a desired state, such as “becoming better” (Irving & Williams, 1999, p. 520). On the contrary, development did not innately hold a value judgement towards the desirable but rather could signify a movement in either direction. For example, again looking at linguistics: “He is developing into a valuable community member” versus “he is developing into a

community nuisance.” This has not been true in regard to growth; children grow up and not down. Development and growth overlap in that when a person develops in a positive direction they can be seen as having grown. Irving and Williams (1999) offered a further example: “‘She is growing into a good counsellor,’ yet ‘She is developing into an unsafe counsellor’” (p. 519). Personal development has included a discussion of successes and failures in the pursuit of goal attainment within a specific context (i.e., career, academics, athletics) “defined in terms of particular skills and understandings, and may or may not be transferable to other contexts” (Irving & Williams, 1999, p. 521). Personal growth, however, was “more or less context-free, in that the skills and understandings acquired through experience define the person who then displays this growth in a variety of situations” (Irving & Williams, 1999, p. 521).

As stated previously, counselor training literature employed personal growth and personal development as interchangeable terms, nevertheless these terms hold significant distinction for counselor educators. Irving and Williams (1999) noted that the failure to distinguish these concepts held complications for educators and students alike, which led to issues for CIT programs practically and ethically. These authors equated personal growth as falling into the realm of personal therapy, whereas personal development pertained to the “needs of the task and of the client” (Irving & Williams, 1999, p. 522). Essentially, personal development was confined to the counselor training program which involved the process of building skills and behaviors which contributed to professional identity development and counselor competency.

Personal growth and personal development are distinct terms which are important to differentiate when addressing counselor education goals and practice in order to develop

competent counselors. For the purpose of this study, Naslund's (2015) adaptation of Irving and Williams' (1999) conceptualization of these terms was adopted:

*Personal Development*: "An aspect of personal change that is purposeful, structured and specific, a planned measurable change that seeks to develop specific skills and qualities focused on enhancing a trainee's professional effectiveness" (p. 2).

*Personal Growth*: "An aspect of personal change that is unstructured, non-specific, and holistic, a retrospective awareness of change that is not planned, but results from experience and personal development" (p. 2).

The current study examined the unintended repercussions of counselor education upon students' interpersonal relationships. As discussed, personal development encompasses planned, intentional, and structured change that advances student professional development. This study wished to explore the counselor identity development process in conjunction with the context-free impact of CIT personal growth as a result of counselor training, described by Irving and Williams (1999), upon their interpersonal experience. Therefore, this study focused on professional development and personal growth as prompted by counselor program involvement and how students interpret personal change to have influenced their relationships with important others.

Counselor education has long embraced the importance of personal and professional development as crucial to counselor competence (Wilkins, 1997). In fact, personal development is considered a key limiting factor in a student's professional development, in that a counselor cannot readily support client growth beyond the counselor's own growth capacities. Wilkins (1997) noted an emotionally unstable clinician lacking self-awareness would be of little help to a client and clinicians "owe" it to their clients to grow as humans themselves. Further, Wilkins



(1997) stated “personal and professional development may be about becoming a more complete practitioner but is also about becoming a fuller, more rounded person” (p. 9).

### **Professional Development**

As alluded to previously, professional development is distinct from both personal development and personal growth. When conceptualizing professional development, it is encouraged to focus on the technical aspects of counseling. Professional development is essentially the accumulation of skills and knowledge, whereas personal development is “everything else which facilitates being a [practicing counselor]” (Wilkins, 1997, p. 15). In this way, Wilkins’ intentionally vague definition allowed for the variable needs of therapists as individuals and acknowledged that these needs change over time. Other authors provided greater detail in their descriptions, associating professional development with technical counseling skills employed in-session and personal development with individual characteristics and traits held by the counselor (McLeod, 1996). The terms are distinguished by dividing them between two realms, with professional development existing within “doing needs” (i.e., counseling techniques, client conceptualization, theory, skills) and personal development in “being needs,” such as “authenticity, interpersonal engagement, intimacy and self-valuation” (Elton-Wilson, 1994, as cited in Donati, & Watts, 2005, p. 476). To further clarify, Rønnestad et al. (2019) provided a helpful list of domains and conceptualized professional development as “changes in the skillfulness, attitudes, cognitive capacities, emotional and interpersonal functioning and vocational identity of professional counsellors and therapists” (p. 215). Professional development was further defined by professional activities such as membership and participation in professional organizations, continuing education, receiving consistent supervision, practicing

ethically, and attending conferences (Donati, & Watts, 2005). For the purpose of this study Souders' (2009) definition of professional development was used:

[Professional development] is the process of acquiring knowledge and skills (e.g., employing counseling techniques, understanding ethical and legal guidelines); it can be developed through various training methods (e.g., coursework, internship). The acquisition of counselor professional development is a process that is often parallel and interchangeable with their personal development as many of the skills associated with effective counseling (e.g., empathy, self-awareness, critical thinking) are also personal characteristics. (p. 7)

Similar to the ways by which personal growth and personal development are intertwined (Irving & Williams, 1999; Naslund, 2015; Wilkins, 1997), personal development and professional development are understood to be inextricably linked (Skovholt, & Rønnestad, 1995). One explanation and example of this is the therapist's use of self in the therapeutic relationship (Gelso, 2002, 2009; Rogers, 1957; Wilkins, 1997). These areas of development are interdependent to such a degree it is hard to isolate one from another, or as Wilkins (1997) would indicate, there is "no clear separation" which suggests professional development and personal development should be considered on a continuum ranging from personal needs to professional needs (p. 5). The intimacy of these concepts is highlighted by counselor development research. Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) described professional development as a life-long process that "involves an increasing higher order integration of the professional self and the personal self" (p. 27). Souders (2009) conceptualized the complex and integrated evolution of professional/personal identities over the career of a counselor as the "[i]ndivisibility of the [p]erson and [p]rofessional" (p. 122). This indivisibility was attributed to the nature of all "life

experiences, personality traits, and intra-/interpersonal relationships” influencing the facets of therapists’ existence, both personally and professionally (Souders, 2009, p. 123). The counselor education process concerns the synthesis of CITs’ experiences (both interior and exterior to their training program), personal characteristics, and counseling knowledge/skills. According to Souders (2009), a counselor relied on life experience as a “point reference” traversing “unfamiliar professional experiences” (p. 123). In the long term, the merger of the personal and professional was so fundamental that therapists who could not establish a tolerable synergy of their individual attributes with their role as a counselor had an increased proclivity to leave the profession (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2012).

### **Personal Change**

The definitions and descriptions of personal growth, personal development, and professional development contain the golden thread of change. Naslund (2015) expressed how “training to be a counselor is more than developing academically and professionally, counselors-in-training must also grow and develop personally” (p. 1). At the heart of counselor education is the understanding that not all individuals inherently embody the personal characteristics necessary to be successful counselors. As a result, counseling programs perform gate-keeping activities to protect stakeholders (Brear et al., 2008). Personal characteristics may be a contributing factor in counselor education program acceptance. That said, once admitted, students are expected to develop significantly prior to graduation.

Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) described this change through their counselor development model in which students transitioned through progressive phases. These phases extended along a continuum from the *lay helper* to the *senior professional*, representing the developmental trajectory of counselors from pre-training to seasoned practitioner. Relevant to

this study were the phases of lay helper, *beginning student*, and *advanced student* which illustrate the transformation of untrained student to degree holder. A brief summary of these phases follows, along with a summary of the *novice professional phase* which will highlight the continued changes counselors experience as a result of their training.

The lay-helper phase was portrayed as an untrained person perhaps accustomed to supporting distressed important others within their sphere. These helpers felt they were natural caregivers and often supported others by offering advice and solutions which they had found personally effective. This phase was characterized by poor boundaries, predominance of sympathy, strong identification, and over-involvement (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003).

The following phase of beginning student was noted by the frequently overwhelming and constantly stimulating experience of counselor training which involved the acquisition of new knowledge, relationships, experiences of self, and adjustment to academic/clinical environs. During this period, students moved from a familiar way of being into the uncharted territory of a progressing counselor identity. This time was marked by uncertainty and self-doubt as CITs learned different ways of being and of understanding, both of which gave rise to anxiety. According to Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003), “students ask themselves if they have the personal characteristics needed for this kind of work, the resourcefulness needed to complete the studies and the ability to bridge the felt chasm between theory and practice” (p. 12). Novice counselors relied on positive feedback from instructors, supervisors, peers, and even clients to help ease their insecurity. Key to counselor development was responsiveness to new learning and an acceptance of complex, multi-faceted, ambiguous nature of counseling.

Upon clinical internship placement, students embodied the role of entry level professional which propelled them into the *advanced student phase* of counselor development. Whereas, in

the previous phase students were fixated on avoiding errors, in this stage students maintained their conservative behavior, yet strove to advance their clinical competency. Perfectionism was high at this point, potentially contributing to rigid, perfunctory relationships with clients. Although trainees felt more comfortable in their clinical role, they remained decidedly dependent on supervisors and peers for positive affirmation (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). The struggle to meet expectations for program completion while striving for autonomy contributed to doubt, causing continual self-evaluation. To address personal deficits, students looked to others to model professional behavior, however their focus became increasingly more internal in assessing how their personality impacted their work with clients (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003).

### **Counselor Training and Student Change**

Other researchers have noted that students change during counselor training (Coll et al., 2013; Furr & Carroll, 2003; McAuliffe, 2002; Naslund, 2015; O’Leary et al., 1994; Schwab & Harris, 1981). A majority of studies focused on changes necessary for counselor preparation, including enhancing counseling skill, augmenting cognitive complexity, heightening empathy, encouraging open-mindedness, and increasing personal/interpersonal awareness.

### **Cognitive Complexity**

Counseling literature indicated counselor cognitive development is related to counseling performance in areas such as case conceptualization, integration of information, and the understanding of interpersonal communication and that counselor educators actively strive to promote student cognitive development (Fong et al., 1997; Foster & McAdams, 1998; Granello, 2000, 2002, 2010). Cognitive development is considered “the growth and maturation of thinking processes of all kinds, including perceiving, remembering, concept formation, problem solving, imagining, and reasoning (VandenBos & American Psychological Association, 2015). An

important aspect of cognitive development is that of cognitive complexity. Over the course of counselor education programs, students develop increased cognitive complexity (Granello, 2002, 2010). Granello (2010) generally defined cognitive complexity as the “ability to absorb, integrate, and make use of multiple perspectives” (p. 92).

Elder and Paul (1994) stated how critical thinking, an important element of cognitive complexity, necessitates an elevated level of sustained self-reflection and intellectual diligence, and is not “simply a way of thinking but a way of being” (p. 34). The cognitive development domain emphasizes the role of critical thinking in a person’s interpreted construction of their experience and their relationships with important others. Relevant to cognitive development, one’s *conceptual level* is employed to measure an individual’s level of cognitive complexity, autonomy, and personal responsibility. Higher conceptual level individuals indicate a heightened self-understanding and the interrelationship of self and context. Low conceptual levels suggest a black-or-white thinker and an intolerance of ambiguity (Halverson et al., 2006). Cognitive complexity is important in developing competent counselors (Brendel et al., 2002; Choate & Granello, 2006; Davidson & Schmidt, 2014; Ridley et al., 2011; Welfare & Borders, 2010) due to its relationship to increased autonomy, self-efficacy, self-awareness, ambiguity tolerance, empathy, and the reduction of anxiety, prejudice, and self-focus (Brendel et al., 2002; Choate & Granello, 2006; Granello, 2010).

Duys and Hedstrom (2000) acknowledged counseling requires practitioners to think in a sophisticated conceptual manner and that “case conceptualization skills, understanding the flow and process of the counseling relationship, attending to multicultural dynamics, and the use of counseling theory call for increasingly complex cognitive processes” (p. 8). This requires counseling programs to provide training which facilitates and encourages cognitive complexity.

The authors explored the role of basic counseling skills training in promoting cognitive complexity. The findings indicated that students who participated in such a training scored higher in cognitive complexity in comparison to students who had not completed basic counseling skills training, the implication being that counselor training impacts the complexity of CIT thinking. The authors suggested the experiential nature of this course directly impacts the development of cognitive complexity and allows for the integration of counselor content knowledge.

Literature demonstrated how high levels of cognitive complexity associated with increased self-efficacy may accentuate counselor competency. Halverson et al. (2006) determined that core content alone did not significantly impact cognitive development. However, with the addition of time and experiential activities such as clinical experiences CITs made cognitive gains. Small advances in moral reasoning (the process of deciding what is “right” or “wrong” in each situation using deductive/inductive streams of logic) were recorded at various stages of counselor training. As might be expected, compelling gains in counselor self-efficacy across the course of training programs were recorded.

Brendel et al. (2002) examined the impact of counseling curriculum designed to increase moral reasoning and cognitive complexity. The authors observed how coursework alone was insufficient in enhancing cognitive complexity and increases were dependent on students completing clinical experiences. Increases in moral reasoning were insignificant, indicating coursework does not adequately prepare students for managing common ethical decisions found in counseling practice.

A longitudinal study by Granello (2002) described the cognitive development of counseling master’s students during their training programs. Students entered training looking to

instructors to “have all the answers” and were frustrated when these expectations were not satisfied (p. 209). Behind this frustration was the belief that there exists a singular solution to treating mental health which is not yet apparent. As students progressed, their thinking became more complex and the dominate belief that there was a solitary solution gave way to the reality that data can be collected to support a specific treatment approach. Overall, the cognitive development of CITs between program commencement and program completion is not significant, however, a significant increase in complex thinking is measured following clinical training experiences (Granello, 2002).

Welfare and Borders (2010) argued overall cognitive complexity scores are not an accurate measure for cognitive development in counseling students. Domain-specific cognitive complexity measures applicable to CITs changed during training more faithfully. As reflected in other studies, cognitive development in these domain-specific areas was enhanced following clinical experiences. Additionally, experience level in terms of degree completion, supervision, counselor education, and time in the counseling field, were all predictors of increased cognitive complexity.

Fong et al. (1997) acknowledged that “small incremental gains” in cognitive development occur for counselors over the course of their training program (p. 110). However, this was not the sole change experienced by the developing counselor. Furthermore, changes in increased open-mindedness were supported both by curricula aimed at enhancing cognitive complexity (Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2006) and multicultural counseling education endeavors (Fawcett et al., 2010).



## **Open-Mindedness**

Training focused on increasing student cognitive complexity has supported transitioning CITs from dualistic thinking toward relativistic thinking. This has allowed for the flexibility of thought necessary to adopt an open-minded stance (Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2006). Multicultural counseling training requires and further promotes this cognitive complexity. In addition to open-mindedness, a culturally competent counselor must have a high level of self-awareness. Sue et al. (1992) stated a culturally skilled counselor is “actively in the process of becoming aware of his or her assumptions about human behavior, values, biases, preconceived notions, personal limitations, and so forth” (p. 481). A culturally sensitive practitioner is aware of their worldview, realize how they have been shaped by their own culture, and understand how this condition influences their work with diverse clientele. Further, culturally competent counselors strive to understand a client’s worldview without judgement and allow said worldview to help shape their therapeutic interventions in a culturally appropriate manner (Sue et al., 1992). This was captured well by Martinez and Dong (2020):

Counselors who are inclined to use diverse perspectives in counseling to understand the complex nature of clients’ issues are more likely to use non-stereotyped approaches in conceptualization, put themselves in the clients’ perspectives, and adopt multiple and integrative strategies to solve clients’ issues. (p. 301)

Understanding one’s worldview, as well as the client’s worldview, challenges CITs to increase their cognitive complexity, self-awareness, and open-mindedness. Students are not equipped to be culturally competent counselors upon entering their training programs, requiring careful, supervised growth and development. A summary of literature describing the changes student experience as a result of multicultural counselor training follows.

Atkins et al. (2017) brought multicultural training closer to home in articulating that “multicultural awareness is a personal affair” (p. 685). The authors noted non-Latino White participants, the focus of their study, became aware of personal childhood social inequities which assisted in the development of empathy for their clients. Students described the challenge to their long-held worldview as “rude awakenings” and as “eye opening,” indicating multicultural training goes beyond academic learning to impact CITs on a personal level. In fact, the authors described the student experience as a “kind of transformation and emancipation” (p. 685). Students developed awareness on many fronts, including privilege, bias, and societal influence on their worldview, all of which may lead to personally instilled assumptions which “could easily be imposed on others” (p. 685). Participants reported feeling motivated and obligated to increase their self-awareness to increase their multicultural counseling competence (MCC).

Furthermore, CITs emphasized the foundational importance of increasing their cultural identity awareness in their multicultural competence development. Students described their recognition of the existence of oppression in the world as a painful journey. That said, CITs reached a point in which they could no longer indulge the temptation to deny the injustice of human experiences, often forcing CITs to accept a privileged status. This indicated that to “become multiculturally aware, practitioners may need emotional intelligence, which includes self-awareness, managing emotions, empathy, and social skill” (Atkins et al., 2017, p. 687). Emotional intelligence is necessary so students may remain open to acknowledging the existence of oppression and any potential identities of privilege they possess rather than responding with avoidance or denial, while simultaneously refraining from becoming overwhelmed by the experience.

Chao et al. (2011) investigated the multicultural counseling competence of trainees with consideration for the race/ethnicity of the student. Their study compared this competence value between racially/ethnically minority students and White students, finding racial/ethnic minority students had a greater base level of multicultural awareness than White students. Multicultural training significantly enhanced multicultural awareness of White trainees while having insignificant effects for racial/ethnic minority trainees, suggesting that the lived experience of racial/ethnic minority trainees may provide awareness that White trainees do not previously possess. Advanced levels of training further improved White students' MCC and awareness yet were not as impactful for racial/ethnic minority students who maintained similar levels of multicultural awareness throughout the counselor training process. The authors hypothesized there may be a "ceiling effect" for racial/ethnic minority trainees when it comes to MCC and that White trainees may need more training to develop multicultural awareness than their counterparts (Chao et al., 2011, p. 78). Additionally, Chao et al. (2011) studied how multicultural training influences color-blindness in CITs, finding that higher levels of training were more likely to challenge student beliefs regarding the importance of race in an individual's identity and lived experience.

Furthermore, Sammons and Speight's (2008) qualitative investigation of student changes associated with multicultural counseling courses uncovered themes of increased self-awareness, increased knowledge, and changes in behavior and attitude. Changes in knowledge included broad multicultural considerations, cultural proficiency, heightened comprehension of oppression, and relationship with/implications for the counseling field. Areas of enhanced self-awareness fell into the five categories of "(a) awareness of [CITs'] own biases, (b) increased identity development, (c) increased awareness of [CITs'] own privileges, (d) enhanced

worldview, and (e) increased professional cultural competence” (p. 825). Attitudinal changes of CITs consisted of heightened negative attitudes towards cultural movements and colleagues, as well as enhanced empathy, critical thinking, and reduction of cultural biases. A majority of these changes appear self-explanatory and have been addressed, however, negative attitude changes are less apparent. During multicultural counseling courses, students experience adverse reactions to fellow students due to observing said peers exert self-protective behaviors in refraining to challenge themselves and abstaining from critical self-reflection. Other students are offended by their fellow students’ obliviousness to personal identity components inherently considered privileged. Frustration also results due to a sense of classmates participating in groupthink, a tendency for individuals to seek group agreement which interferes with group decision making.

Despite the tensions from these potential blind spots manifesting within the classroom, beneficial behavioral changes reported by CITs participating in MCC programming include deeper relationships, reduction of biased language, expanded advocacy, heightened professional competency, and the pursuit of more multicultural training. Participants credited multicultural course elements, including instructor influence, quality of lectures, interactive activities, reflective practices, and the course overall for encouraging personal change in terms of MCC (Sammons & Speight, 2008).

### **Empathy**

A key element of MCC, and counseling in general, is empathy. Empathy generally refers to understanding others’ experience from their frame of reference rather than one’s own. Bloom et al. (2018) stated, “empathy plays an integral role in the facilitation of therapeutic relationships and promotion of positive client outcomes” (p. 341). A primary means in which counselors formulate strong therapeutic relationships is through the “counselor’s ability to experience and

communicate empathy” (Bloom et al., 2018, p. 343). Responding empathically to clients effectively communicates an understanding, on the counselor’s part, of the client’s feelings, experiences, and behaviors related to said feelings, both articulated and implicit (Crutchfield et al., 2000). Empathy development is therefore a principal concern of counselor educators among CITs (Bloom et al., 2018; Coll et al., 2013; Crutchfield et al., 2000; Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2006; Lyons & Hazier, 2002). Empathy training in counseling programs is implemented through basic counseling skills training, lectures, experiential learning opportunities, reflection exercises, and role plays (Bloom et al., 2018; Coll et al., 2013; Lyons & Hazier, 2002).

Lyons and Hazier (2002) investigated the relationship between cognitive development and empathy. Comparing first- and second-year counseling students, Lyons and Hazier (2002) found a significant improvement in cognitive and empathy development. The authors neglected to establish a link connecting cognitive complexity and empathy. That said, their research recognized differences among first- and second-year counseling students in these areas. The study indicated that empathy was developed through counseling coursework, evident via significant differences on empathy measured between first- and second-year students. Additionally, affective/trait-based empathy, a characteristic commonly thought to be stable, was shown to increase as CITs advanced programmatically, suggesting this aspect of empathy could be further developed through training.

Bloom et al. (2018) provided contrary findings when comparing counseling students’ and non-counseling students’ empathy levels. Researchers have hypothesized the counseling field would attract individuals with high trait empathy or that CITs would develop high levels of empathy through counselor education. The authors failed to find significant differences in empathy between counseling students and non-counseling students. To explain this outcome, the

researchers suggested that basic skills training alone was not sufficient in enhancing empathy in CITs and may have been equivalent to the orientation/introductory training provided by other academic disciplines.

Although empathy development has been considered crucial to counselor competency, there has existed little consensus among counselor educators regarding the teaching of this intangible skill (Bayne & Jangha, 2016). Recent literature has addressed this need through creative means. Bohecker and Doughty Horn (2016) examined the connection between mindfulness practice and empathy development. The study found students receiving mindfulness training which included a mindfulness group experience demonstrated increased levels of empathy. The authors suggested this was a result of mindfulness practice allowing the student to “accurately and emotionally experience another’s feelings without becoming lost in those feelings” (Bohecker & Doughty Horn, 2016, p. 323). Another creative activity educators employ to increase empathy was exemplified by Bayne and Jangha’s (2016) use of improvised acting in counselor training. The authors promoted acting games to supplement microskills training, providing experiential activities that “foster skills related to empathy, such as perspective taking, here-and-now spontaneity, and enhanced understanding of what empathy entails” (p. 260).

Coll et al. (2013) examined student attitudinal changes as prompted by counselor curriculum. Three courses (Foundations of Counseling, Counseling Theory and Skills, and Ethics in Counseling) were investigated to explore impact on CITs. Although all three courses led to a shift in healthy counselor attitudes, the ethics course was found to produce the most significant changes in attitude regarding self-awareness, diversity, professional boundaries, professional impairment/self-care, and counselor empathy. Empathy was identified by students as the most important quality in a therapist’s practice. Following completion of this course, CITs were seen

to be more open to adjusting their therapeutic approach to consider the client's cultural origin. This study supported the ways by which students experience change during counselor training.

### **Personal and Interpersonal Awareness**

A fundamental goal of counseling programs has been to increase CIT intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Ieva et al., 2009; Wilkinson, 2011; Woodside et al., 2007). Aponte (1994) described therapy as a "personal encounter within a professional frame" (p. 3). The use of counselor personhood was considered a "critical tool" in the delivery of effective counseling and demanded an appropriate level of self-awareness on the counselor's part (Pieterse et al., 2013, p. 190). Wilkinson (2011) stated how counselor competence included the ability to "practice with integrity, within specified ethical guidelines, and with a comprehensive understanding of clients and presenting problem" which "require counselors to be self-aware" (p. 24). The purpose of interpersonal training has been to assist CITs in building therapeutic relationships, to "become curious about client dynamics and relationship patterns, interpret defenses and resistances, become aware of and deal with client dynamics in the therapeutic relationship, and become aware of and manage countertransference" (Hill et al., 2015, p. 184). Interpersonal awareness has been a key element of developing the counseling relationship, viewed as the strongest predictor of successful therapeutic outcome (Lambert & Barley, 2001). Self-awareness and interpersonal awareness combine in building the therapeutic relationship, acknowledging the counselor's impact on their client and formulating the appropriate intervention. Pieterse et al. (2013) provided a definition of self-awareness that will be adopted for the purpose of this study: "[The] state of being conscious of one's thoughts, feelings, beliefs, behaviours and attitudes, and knowing how these factors are shaped by important aspects of ones' developmental and social history" (p. 191). Interpersonal awareness refers to an

“awareness of both communicated and received interpersonal messages, as well as their understanding of their impact on interpersonal relationships” (Kivlighan et al., 2019, p. 65). A brief summary of literature addressing the changes in intrapersonal/interpersonal awareness as experienced by students during counselor training follows.

Furr and Carroll (2003) indicated, as students acquired knowledge and developed skills through counselor education, by stating how they “grow on the interpersonal and intrapersonal levels” (p. 483). The authors examined critical incidents contributing to counselor development to provide a framework for understanding. Experiential experiences were more meaningful for students than didactic learning, due to the opportunity for CITs to employ their newfound counseling knowledge with peers, attributing supervision, and fieldwork to be the strongest factors in counselor development. Counselors-in-training spoke to activities like personal growth groups and personal counseling to have bolstered their development through increased self-understanding.

Woodside et al. (2007) produced similar findings in their phenomenological interviews of pre-practicum students. Students reported a value shift in transitioning from advice-giving to an approach inclusive of listening to and being with clients in order to better understand their point of view; rather than attempting to solve the client’s problem, students adopted the stance of empowering the client to find their own solutions. In addition, CITs emphasized the importance of taking care of themselves so that they could in turn provide support to clients. They used the knowledge acquired in coursework to “help others, as well as themselves” (Woodside et al., 2007, p. 23). Students noted that using skills and information learned in counseling training to explore themselves further developed personal self-awareness. The exploration of boundaries was highlighted in that CITs discovered the need to differentiate personal and professional



boundaries. Students struggled with refraining from counseling friends and family with their personal problems, as well as with maintaining firm professional boundaries with clients.

Ieva et al. (2009) investigated the role of experiential groups on counselor development, finding students understood that group experience provided increased self-awareness, group process and dynamics knowledge, empathy for clients, role modeling of a group facilitator, and interpersonal learning. Participants felt the experiential group significantly enhanced their personal and professional development through increasing self-awareness and areas of personal growth to support their counselor development and improve their communication skills. Additionally, students expressed the value of personal reflection in the journaling assignments associated with personal growth group experiences.

Kivlighan et al. (2019) studied the role of CITs' perception of group cohesion in experiential training groups as it related to fostering interpersonal awareness and social learning. Experiential group training appeared to be effective in increasing interpersonal awareness and social learning, with group cohesion playing an important function. The authors encouraged counselor educators to heighten group cohesion within group training through implementing a group format, fostering an engaged group environment, and supervising group member verbal interaction to maximize interpersonal learning outcomes.

Lim's (2008) phenomenological study explored the transformative nature of students engaging in genogram creation as part of coursework. The process of researching, developing, and presenting genograms had intrapersonal and interpersonal transformative effects on CITs. Students reported developing healthier relationships with themselves and with important others. Participants described the generation of greater awareness of relationship patterns and dynamics within families-of-origin, as well as the recognition of alternative avenues of relating to family

members. This perspective shift was described by students as supporting their counselor growth and development. Genogram work in the classroom was viewed as a secure and encouraging activity for CITs to scrutinize presumptions and formulate new meaning from past experience. Through this intervention, students explored family history and current relationship dynamics to do self-work, promoting enhanced self-awareness and understanding.

### **Interpersonal Relationships**

In addition to personal change experienced as an outcome of counselor training, students experience relationship change. In Bischoff's (1997) qualitative study of novice counselors' first 3-months of client contact, students described clinical experience as stressful, managed by investing mental and emotional energy into clients and professional development often to the detriment of CITs' personal relationships. Relationships with clients were seen to become more permeable during this period while relationships with friends and family became more rigid, leading to personal relationship stress. Relationship difficulties were accentuated when friends and family sought to share personal problems with CITs. Bischoff (1997) suggested this was due to role conflict between students' previous held role of lay helper to that of professional helper. This resulted in CITs seeking to limit interaction with friends and family. Students appeared to experience a process of boundary clarification in counselor training wherein they solidified appropriate boundaries with clients and reestablished or clarified new boundaries in personal relationships. As students progressed through their clinical experience, they became more comfortable in balancing their newfound professional role and their personal relationships. They no longer avoided family and friends and were capable of incorporating counseling skills during interactions without fear of role conflict.

Stressors and enhancers of marriage and family therapy (MFT) training programs upon students and their spouses have received research attention. Graduate programs have been shown to be stressful for students and their families, increasing risk of divorce for couples (Sori et al., 1996). Efforts to explain this included spouses of graduate students feeling the need to place personal goals on hold, increased financial responsibility suffered by spouses, as well as changes in “values, interests, and opinions” on the part of the student, creating an “emotional gulf between spouses” (Sori et al., 1996, p. 260). Students’ commitment of time and energy to their education has also been thought to lead to neglect of relationships. Explanations specific to MFT students include the examination of family-of-origin and marriages as required by training contributing to the confrontation of problems and thereby leading to conflict. Participants reported having too little time and energy for their marriage/family, leaving their spouse to “fill the void” (Sori et al., 1996, p. 265). Both students and spouses noted that rapid personal growth and development of students may cause spouses to “feel threatened or left behind” (p. 266).

These factors acknowledged, Sori et al. (1996) discovered that students and their spouses found the experience of the training program to be ultimately more enhancing than stressful. The author suggested this was due to the sense of satisfaction produced by the students’ hard work and personal growth, as well as the acquisition of knowledge and skills which could be effectively and sensitively applied to their personal and family life, supporting students in better managing marital problems. A relationship enhancer experienced by couples was the student’s perspective shift toward accepting their role in marriage and family problems.

Similarly, Dahl et al. (2010) studied the impact of MFT training on student marriages through qualitative interviews with student spouses. The researchers stressed the broad impact of training future counselors, stating students brought with them their interpersonal relationships

(e.g., friends, spouses, families of origin, children), which the authors described as a “kind of ‘butterfly effect’ of psychotherapy training on those who are in significant relationships” with students (Dahl et al., 2010, p. 3). The researchers went on to indicate that the benefits of counselor training were further enhanced through “awareness of and attention to” this effect (Dahl et al., 2010, p. 3). Marriage and family therapy CITs’ spouses reported negative impact on their relationships due to time and financial constraints related to their spouse’s graduate education. Spouses often found themselves charged with the roles and responsibilities that their partners once fulfilled, contributing to stress and, in some circumstances, resentment. Although some spouses experienced a sense of being neglected or abandoned by their partner’s personal and intellectual growth, a majority of participants report their partner’s growth as stimulating for them intellectually. Counselor training of students was deemed to have positive effects on marital relationships through increased relationship awareness/knowledge and improved communication on the part of the student. Some spouses described fears that their partner’s spiritual faith would be undermined by counselor training. These study participants, however, found their own and their spouse’s faith to be strengthened through the counselor education process.

Along a similar research vein, Murray and Kleist (2011) investigated the impact of counselor training on student couples’ relationships through qualitative interviews of CITs. These researchers recognized that counselor education urged CIT growth and change without understanding the possible repercussions for and ramifications upon student couples’ relationships. Without this knowledge, educators were unable to implement educational structures to support students in addressing relationship challenges. Participants reported counselor training experiences such as multicultural education, basic counselor skills training,

genogram creation, group experience, and the adoption of a personal counseling theory as eliciting helpful intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness.

Training has resulted in students developing awareness of personal relationships, family-of-origin patterns, and a deeper scrutiny of their romantic relationships. Students have assessed their intimate partner relationships, determining whether they meet their desires, standards, and expectations. Increased awareness has led to students making intrapersonal and interpersonal changes to address said needs and desires. Research has demonstrated interpersonal changes which include “challenging rules, challenging roles, sacrificing, communicating, stating needs, and enhancing connection.” Students sought to actively change “norms and ways of being” in their romantic relationships, for example “challenging rules of confrontation” by allowing more emotional authenticity during disagreements and other relationship difficulties (Murray & Kleist, 2011, p. 127). Challenging roles might have reflected a reexamination of household duties, family responsibilities, and fiscal responsibilities, as well as an analysis of gender roles. The topic of sacrifice referred to students losing time and connection with their loved one due to educational commitments. Changes in communication included shifts in CITs’ “expression of conflicts, concerns, secrets, and emotions [becoming] present in their couple relationships” (Murray & Kleist, 2011, p. 127). Students began to address their experience of their relationships in the “here-and-now” with more emotional authenticity and less avoidance of scary relationship issues. Communicating in a more clear, direct, and honest manner, students were able to express their relationship needs and expectations. The culmination of these relationship behavior changes resulted in CITs experiencing an “enhanced connection” with their partners leading to “powerful experiences of becoming closer with their partners” (Murray & Kleist, 2011, p. 127). As students’ counselor identity developed, requiring increased awareness and behavior change,

students experienced strong “financial, emotional, and task-oriented support” from their partners, generating a sense of deep appreciation and gratitude on the part of the student (Murray & Kleist, 2011, p. 128).

In terms of the impacts of interpersonal relationships, Farber (1983) observed a surfeit of literature focusing on the therapist influence on the client and a “notable paucity of research on the enduring effects of the therapeutic role on therapists themselves” (p. 174). The author suggested counselors were shaped by their work and after hours of providing therapy at work were apt to maintain a therapeutic perspective in their interpersonal relationships outside of work. This included bringing their “special skills and psychological understanding into their homes” (Farber, 1983, p. 180). Counselors’ perspectives of themselves and of others were shaped by counseling theory and therapeutic constructs, contributing to a counseling career as a “lifestyle” that did not necessarily have an “on-off” switch. By way of counselor training, therapists were “totally immersed in a ‘psychological’ world” which was further reinforced through post-graduate day-to-day work with clients and through continuing education. Farber’s study of practicing professional therapists described their “increased psychological mindedness” as a “double-edge sword,” allowing them personal and interpersonal insight, and yet leading to over-analysis of social interactions with the potential to restrict spontaneity and reduce connection. The counseling occupation was deemed as stressful and “extremely consuming,” leaving little time or energy for family or personal interests. Positive aspects of therapeutic work included “increased knowledge and sensitivity as well as heightened personal feelings of self-assurance, assertiveness, and self-reliance” (Farber, 1983, p. 181).

Integrating counseling skills into interpersonal relationships, C. M. Miller et al. (2020) characterized counselors’ work and personal life as a “reciprocal relationship” in which one

influenced the other, where both positive and negative conditions “spillover” in “bidirectional ways” (p. 385). This study explored the experience of spouses married to licensed, practicing marriage therapists. Participants reported appreciating their partner’s clinical expertise such as communication skills and relationship awareness. They were not, however, appreciative when feeling challenged by their partner or when feeling their relationship was being over-analyzed. Clinical knowledge was generally welcomed “when it was not unsolicited or self-serving” (C. M. Miller et al., 2020, p. 399). Participants did not hold expectations of a perfect marriage due to their spouse’s career and experienced frustration when their partner displayed unskillful relational behaviors, feeling that their partners failed to “practice at home what they preach at the office” (C. M. Miller et al., 2020, p. 399). A point of contention existed when participants felt their perspectives were undervalued by friends and family in light of their spouse’s expertise. Participants were firm in that they did not want their spouse to act as their therapist.

### **Conclusion**

Counselor education has held expectations for personal and professional development, which included student individual change in areas such as enhanced cognitive complexity, heightened empathy, greater open-mindedness, and increased personal/interpersonal awareness. Through counseling coursework such as genogram creation, small group experiences, multicultural education, self-reflection activities, personal counseling theory development, clinical endeavors, and interaction with peers, instructors, and supervisors, students gained knowledge and developed increased intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness (Atkins et al., 2017; Chao et al., 2011; Ieva et al., 2009; Lim, 2008; Woodside et al., 2007). This knowledge and increased awareness contributed to CIT personal growth. Due to the nature of counseling wherein the counselor’s use of “self” in the therapeutic relationship was fundamental in

achieving positive client outcome, the personal could not be separated from the professional (Gelso, 2002, 2009; Pieterse et al., 2013; Rogers, 1957; Wilkins, 1997). Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) supported this by describing professional development as a life-long process that “involves an increasing higher order integration of the professional self and the personal self” (p. 27). The integration of personal and professional was seen as an essential component of counselor competency (Wilkins, 1997). Literature suggested that, due to “life experiences, personality traits, and intra-/interpersonal relationships” influencing all facets of counselors’ personal and professional existence, the person and the professional were, in fact, indivisible (Souders, 2009, p. 123).

Furr and Carroll (2003) noted that students “change” as they advance through counselor training and “grow on the interpersonal and intrapersonal levels” (p. 483). This review of counselor training literature did not capture every aspect of CIT change, yet it attempted to comprehensively describe numerous ways by which students experienced change as a result of counselor training. Murray and Kleist’s (2011) study established this critical link between student personal growth and development and interpersonal relationship change. This correlation was not surprising due to presented literature which stated how students early in their training experience often experimented with their new role as a counselor with friends and family as a means of furthering their counselor identity development (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1995; Sori et al., 1996). This experimentation “can add a positive dimension to the person’s interpersonal relationships; at other times the boundary between roles is inappropriately crossed” (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1995, p. 26). Bischoff (1997) indicated that CITs often experienced relationship stress with friends and family due to role confusion, leading students to create more rigid boundaries in interpersonal relationships.



Dahl et al. (2010) went farther in linking the impact of counselor training upon student interpersonal relationships by describing a “butterfly effect” and stating:

For those involved in the formation of serving professionals, it has become increasingly clear that we have more people in classrooms, practica, and supervision sessions than solely the tuition paying students. They bring with them, for example, their families of origin, their friends, their children, and--for those who are married--their spouses. (p. 3)

Murray and Kleist (2011) noted students who entered counselor training “became aware of personal and relational patterns. Their awareness then became fodder for making personal and relational changes” (p. 125). It was evident that counselor training impacted CITs’ interpersonal relationships and counselor educators would greatly benefit by greater awareness and knowledge of this “butterfly effect” of counselor training upon CITs’ involved in said relationships (Dahl et al., 2010; Murray & Kleist, 2011). Researchers have acknowledged a “paucity of literature” regarding the impact of counselor training upon student interpersonal relationships (Sori et al., 1996, p. 261). The absence of this information created a blind spot for both CITs and counselor educators, limiting the ability of students to be adequately prepared for this experience and for educators to support students through possible interpersonal relationship transition.

### CHAPTER III

#### METHODOLOGY

This study incorporated interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore how engaging in the process of counselor education might have influenced counselor-in-training (CIT) experiences of interpersonal relationships and what qualities characterized the nature of this influence. Interpretative phenomenological analysis integrated phenomenology, idiography, and hermeneutics, producing a method which was both descriptive and interpretative. This design allowed for each participant's experience of interpersonal relationships before and during their counseling training to be heard, as well as provided the researcher an opportunity to conceptualize this experience. This chapter will include a description of IPA methodology, ontological and epistemological considerations, theoretical overview, research questions, the role of the researcher, study methods, trustworthiness procedures, and ethical concerns.

#### **Axiological, Ontological, and Epistemological Considerations**

This study was grounded in the paradigm of constructivism. A paradigm has been defined as a set of "basic beliefs" regarding "first principles" which influence the holder's worldview in terms of the "nature of the 'world,' the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 107). These first principles are beyond the realm of validation and must be accepted on faith (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Simply put, a paradigm is one's perspective of and their interaction with "what is." A paradigm

functions as a lens through which a researcher approaches their study and reflects what the researcher feels is valuable and ethical (axiology), their view of the nature of reality (ontology), and their relationship with knowledge (epistemology; Killam, 2013). Relevant to conceptualizing this study, it should be noted that constructivism has been founded in relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology.

Axiology has recognized that the values of the researcher influence the research process (Ponterotto, 2005). It has acknowledged how underlying beliefs are ingrained in research paradigms which direct researcher choices and has suggested how research objectives align with the researcher's values and are ethically consistent (Killam, 2013). Constructivist axiology has asserted the researcher's values, beliefs, and lived experience cannot be removed from the scientific process (Ponterotto, 2005). Constructivism has considered research to be an interdependent relationship between the researcher and the participant requiring familiar, prolonged engagement "in order to facilitate their construction and expression of the 'lived experience' being studied" (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 131). From the constructivist perspective it has been thought inevitable that the researcher view information through a personal lens. For this reason, the researcher must recognize, report, and limit the influence of their values in the research process (Ponterotto, 2005). The primary goal of a constructivist researcher has been to represent the participant's voice and ensure that the interpretation of the participant's lived experience is accurately and fairly characterized (Killam, 2013). Constructivist axiology has observed ethical principles which have included justice, beneficence, and respect, all of which align closely with professional values that "provide a conceptual basis" for the ethical principles of the (American Counseling Association, 2014, p. 3). This consideration then supported the

appropriateness of this axiology in examining the intersection of counselor education and CIT interpersonal relationships.

Ontology has addressed the nature of reality which can either be defined as absolute and independent of interpretation (realism) or fluid and dynamic and subject to the interpretation of the individual (relativism). Contrary to realism which has sought to find “the truth,” relativism has viewed reality as essentially interactive and subject to individual meaning-making. Considering the subjectivity of relativism, reality and context have been considered interdependent and cannot be separated (Killam, 2013). Reality has thus been comprised of “intangible mental constructions” influenced by society, culture, and personal experience, therefore variable between persons and setting (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). In this manner, reality has not been discovered as in realism but rather reality has been constructed through interaction with the social environment (Killam, 2013). This has allowed for the existence of multiple varied realities that are not more or less valid than the differing perceptions of groups or individuals. This view of reality has captured the values of the counseling field which forego a one-size-fits-all approach to treatment, but rather tailor interventions to meet client needs. Similarly, counselor education has viewed each student as distinct, unique, and in possession of singular perspectives which shape their experience with education and interpersonal relationships. This study aspired to give students a voice by speaking to the influence of counselor education upon the broader context of their experience of relationships.

Epistemology has considered the relationship between knowledge and the knower; giving rise to the question of how one knows what one knows. The researcher’s epistemological stance would inevitably shape their interactions with their study participants (Smith et al., 2009). Typically, this relationship has reflected one of two approaches: objective and subjective. The

objective stance has dictated that the researcher maintain distance from participants to observe and not influence. Contrary to this approach, subjectivism has recognized the role of the researcher in construction of knowledge. Therefore, constructivist epistemology has been viewed as an interactive process between researcher and participants “so that the ‘findings’ are literally created as the investigation proceeds” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111). Embedded in the counseling field has been the understanding that experience is subjective and open to interpretation. No two individuals will relate to life events identically. For this reason, the counselor could not assume to understand the client’s lived experiences but instead must support the client in sharing their personal story. Similarly, CITs’ experience of counselor training and interpersonal relationships would not be singular. It was the role of researcher to allow the CIT participants of this study to share their subjective stories so that the experience of counselor training and the possible influence upon interpersonal relationships could be better understood.

### **Theoretical Considerations**

Interpretative phenomenological analysis is founded on the theoretical principles of phenomenology, idiography, and hermeneutics. Although phenomenology has evolved across time in accordance with the varied viewpoints of philosophers such as Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre, a commonality has existed in these pundits’ exploration of the experience of being human and engaging with our world. In addition to capturing what life is like, *phenomenology* has sought to understand lived experiences. While Husserl emphasized the significance of “experience and its perception,” Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre expanded on phenomenology to include a “view of the person as embedded and immersed in a world of objects and relationships, language and culture, projects and concerns.” Through the work of these later philosophers the phenomenological stance transitioned from a focus on description of

lived experiences to that of interpretation and contextual perception. Smith et al. (2009) captured this in stating that the aforementioned philosophers developed how a “complex understanding of ‘experience’ invokes a lived process, an unfurling of perspectives and meanings, which are unique to the person’s embodied and situated relationship to the world” (Smith et al., 2009, pp. 27-28). Launching from this theoretical base, IPA was founded upon an essentially interpretative relationship between the individual and the world in which they seek to make meaning from their worldly interactions. Through this increased understanding presented by phenomenological exploration, counselors have been provided ideas from which to conceptualize humanities’ lived experience (Smith et al., 2009).

The interpretative theoretical foundations of IPA have resided within hermeneutic philosophy. *Hermeneutics* arose from the interpretation of religious writings before expanding to that of secular material, as well. The goal of hermeneutics was to examine the process of interpretation, reveal the intentions of the author, and explore both the role of the context in which a work was written and the context of the written work’s interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). The writings of the philosopher Heidegger described phenomenology as hermeneutic in nature, building a strong foundation for IPA in integrating hermeneutics and phenomenology. A key idea found in hermeneutics has been the *hermeneutic circle* which investigates the relationship between an entity and the aspects which comprise the entity, a circular process in which to “understand any given part, you look to the whole; to understand the whole, you look to the parts” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 35). This circular action speaks to the critical principle of IPA *iterative analysis*, where the researcher flows fluidly between varying methods of viewing data, in opposition to the typically linear activity of data analysis. Interpretative phenomenological analysis has drawn from Heidegger a focus on studying the development of a phenomenon,

tasking the researcher to find meaning in the phenomenon. The philosophical writings of Gadamer built upon the contributions of Heidegger through hermeneutics, examining the relationship between context and the phenomenon being explored (Smith et al., 2009).

The final theoretical foundation of IPA is the study of the particular, known as *idiography*. Typically, psychological research has focused on the general, known as nomothetic, assessing for themes among groups or populations in an effort to describe common human development. The idiographic attention to the specific has been a unique perspective of IPA research that works on two levels. First, it has involved a systematic, in-depth, thorough, and detailed analysis. This is followed by a dedicated endeavor to comprehend, from the viewpoint of distinct people within a distinct context, a specific lived experience. An important goal of IPA idiography has been to locate participants within their unique contexts, investigate their individual perspectives, and examine each participant case in-depth prior to establishing broader assertions regarding experiential phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009).

Furthermore, this study relied upon the theoretical lens of *reciprocity* found within social exchange theory (SET) through which to view the findings. Social exchange theory in its most basic distillation has described social interaction as an exchange in which members endeavor to minimize losses and maximize gains within the constraints of social rules deemed equitable. Inherent to SET has been the *reciprocity norm* which establishes the expectation that individuals will repay benefits provided them by others (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Molm (2010) expanded upon the idea of reciprocity with *reciprocal exchange*, the notion that “actors perform individual acts that benefit another, like giving help or advice, without negotiation and without knowing whether or when the other will reciprocate” (p. 120). Reciprocal exchange has been considered distinct from the idea of reciprocity and is often taken for granted within SET under

the assumption that the former describes a negotiated two-party direct exchange in which the gains are known. Within reciprocal exchange, received benefits from interactions with others have been perceived as unknown and reciprocation may not manifest. Molm (2010) stated “when actors give to another with no assurance of reciprocity, they risk potential loss-giving to another while receiving little or nothing in return” (p. 124). This has been relevant in that reciprocal exchange involves uncertainty, therefore requiring trust on the part of the benefactor (DeLamater & Ward, 2013). In fact, risk is a vital element in developing trust. Through social exchange in which there is a danger of non-reciprocation individuals have been provided an opportunity to prove themselves trustworthy and judge the trustworthiness of others. Through such exchanges that have been termed “voluntary and uncertain” effective investment in relationships, above and beyond perceived benefits, are communicated (Molm, 2010, p. 124).

Reciprocal exchange was included in this study in order to assist in fostering a greater understanding of how CIT perception of relationships differs following their experience of counselor education. A pilot study in anticipation of this current study, conducted by the author and a co-researcher, suggested ways by which counselor training contributed to a reevaluation of interpersonal relationships by CITs. This reassessment of relationships on the part of CITs seemed to be related to an examination of both costs and benefits within the relationship. In this original study, participants generally looked to the level of investment (i.e., emotional energy, time commitment, etc.) demanded to maintain the relationship compared to what was received in turn from the relationship. Many participants acknowledged ways by which the returns on their relationship investments were unequal to the gains received but that this inequality did not deter them from the continuation of said relationships if the imbalance remained tolerable. Following



this analysis, it was found that participants chose either to continue the connection or to terminate; this termination the authors described as *pruning*. Consistent across participants, CITs reported experiencing a sense of personal growth through the process of counselor training. Furthermore, a notable factor related to the continuation of the relationship was the CITs' sense that the relationship had grown along with the counselor as they moved through their training program. This relationship growth was dependent upon the willingness of the external party to invest in the evolution and development of the relationship (Ward & Hamilton, 2018). Considering the information gleaned through the pilot study, the inclusion of reciprocal exchange in the current research endeavor was well-founded. It was the hope of this researcher that incorporating the theoretical lens of reciprocal exchange in this study provided a framework from which to draw more complex interpretations of participant experience.

### **Research Question**

This study sought to answer the following primary research question:

- Q1 How does counselor education training impact/influence the interpersonal relationships of counselors-in-training (CITs)?

### **Researcher Influence Mitigation**

Because of the subjective nature of qualitative research and the inability to separate the qualitative researcher from the research itself, it was imperative that the research process remain as transparent as possible (Hunt, 2011). This subjectivity was mitigated by the researcher stating their assumptions and bias, maintaining a reflexive and responsive stance with regards to findings, and faithfully representing participant narratives (Morrow, 2005). In an effort to promote rigor and transparency, it was important that I, as the researcher, deliberately endeavored to address my personal preconceptions, values, beliefs, and personal experiences with an awareness to how the research process could be influenced by such biases. The use of a

bridling journal offered the researcher an opportunity to identify and manage these influences as it was employed to increase overall researcher awareness, as well as to aid in the restraining of pre-understanding while encouraging the questioning of assumptions throughout the research process (Vagle, 2009). The study incorporated an external auditor whose responsibility was to review transcripts and confirm/deny the researcher's thematic conclusions. Additionally, by collecting and offering direct quotes in context, the authentic, unadulterated voices of participants were distinctly heard, allowing readers to execute their own evaluation of study themes independent of the researcher.

I have identified as a cisgender, heterosexual, educated, able-bodied, middle-class white male in my mid-40s. The sum of my identities has translated in our societal and cultural context to a position of power and privilege. As a supervisor for CITs and a counselor myself, I must always maintain an awareness of the manner my accumulated privileges may impact relational dynamics with the clients and students I work among. I have made every effort to acknowledge and minimize the power differential inherent in my position and privilege within these relationships. As a researcher I remained cognizant of how my identities may influence the experience of participants. In this role it was imperative that I endeavored to reduce any impact that my identities had on participants' sharing of stories. In interviewing research participants I strove to acknowledge, address, and honor identity differences between participants and myself in an effort to create an open, inviting environment in which participants could disclose their experiences without burden of power disparity. Although my societal privilege had the potential to impact any relationship I engage in as a researcher, it was relevant to address an additional and unique dynamic in this study related to my interconnected identities of being both a practicing licensed professional counselor and a Counselor Education and Supervision doctoral student.

Due to this precise positionality, participants may have assumed that I possessed counseling expertise in my role as researcher. This potential assumption may have influenced and even limited the degree of openness participants experienced in conveying their narratives due to a sense of professional vulnerability, as participants may have feared judgment around their perception of their experience by an individual in their field with greater professional/educational experience. As the researcher, I remained mindful of this potentiality and made efforts to minimize any negative repercussions were such an experience to have arisen for any participant. This was addressed through encouraging and validating each participant's narrative, recognizing the participant to be an expert of their own experience, and engaging with each participant in an authentic, vulnerable, person-first manner. This degree of authenticity and sensitivity involved the embracing of the intellectual and emotional challenging nature of counseling training.

Along these lines, as a counseling student myself, I have harbored a first-hand understanding of the challenges associated with counseling training, personal growth, and professional identity development. I have had personal investment in and opinions around my own narratives in experiencing interpersonal relationship change as it related to my counseling training and subsequent personal/professional growth. Through this study I was eager to better understand the interaction between counseling education and interpersonal relationships with the hope of applying any knowledge base gained to counselor education programs so that more resources could be made available to support counseling students on their academic, introspective, and relational journeys.

### **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

Interpretative phenomenological analysis is a modern approach to qualitative research utilized in this study to expand general understanding of the relational impacts of counselor

training programs. Ideography, phenomenology, and hermeneutics are the underlying principles upon which the IPA approach is built (R. M. Miller et al., 2018). The primary focus of this design was to generate an understanding of “how individuals make sense of their experiences” and to faithfully portray such (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 8). Interpretative phenomenological analysis has rested upon a foundation which assumes individuals are active and engaged in the interpretation of their own lives, awareness and analysis around events, important others, and even inanimate objects. In this way, the role of the researcher was to (a) seek to understand from the participants’ perspectives their individualized experiences and (b) through interpretation of the findings to make meaning of said experiences. In this process the researcher remained mindful of their influence upon the participant as they elicited each participant’s story and the interpretation of their subjective experience. Interpretative phenomenological analysis has incorporated phenomenological and hermeneutical concepts in a manner that is both descriptive, “letting things speak for themselves,” and interpretative, recognizing “there is no such thing as an uninterpreted phenomenon” (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 8).

The idiographic nature of IPA has been demonstrated through the examination of individual experiences rather than universal experiences. This approach contrasts with traditional phenomenology which has sought to describe the commonality of participant experiences of a shared phenomenon by the reduction of said experiences “to a description of the universal essence” (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). The goal of IPA is to explore the particular rather than the general, requiring the researcher to examine individual participant cases in context and in isolation before moving to develop general themes between participants. This approach allowed the researcher to capture the nuance of participant narrative and convey similarity and disparity of experience between participants.

R. M. Miller et al. (2018) stated how the underlying principles of ideography, phenomenology, and hermeneutics, as well as the rigorous methodology of the IPA approach have made it “well suited” for the study of counselor education and supervision (p. 240). This goodness-of-fit has been attributed to the flexibility inherent in the IPA approach, providing for a deep exploration of phenomena and an emphasis on highlighting diverse experiences, the importance of context, and connection to personal narratives. These characteristics have been strongly related to counselor education and supervision values around honoring developmental, contextual, and diversity factors as they arise in the counseling profession. The close alignment between the tenants of IPA and the values guiding counseling, along with the approach’s inherently rigorous methodology, afforded a solid justification for the utilization of IPA in this study.

## **Methods**

### **Sampling and Recruitment**

In order to best identify suitable candidates for study participation, the researcher made efforts to contact via email a variety of counselor education department chairs at universities throughout the U.S. in order to allow for regional diversity in the study’s outcomes. Information provided to potential participants during the recruitment process included (Appendix A):

1. Explanation of the nature of the study and its intent,
2. Inclusion/exclusion criteria for participant screening,
3. Explanation of interview administration and expectations of participants (i.e., time commitment), and
4. Institutional Board Review number.

Per recommended size for an IPA study design, the researcher attempted to secure six to eight participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) described a process of simultaneous data processing and interviewing, which assisted the researcher toward adjusting and refining the interview questions as they progressed through participant interviews. Using this method, the researcher was able to identify patterns and themes during the study itself, thereby recognizing when themes reached a point of redundancy, referred to as saturation.

### **Interview Setting**

Individuals selected for study participation were interviewed via a Zoom platform, which provided flexibility for participant availability, convenience, and geographic location. Only the participant and the researcher were present for these interviews. All interviews were audio recorded with participant permission and took place in a setting which ensured participant confidentiality.

### **Participants**

The primary and broadest criteria for eligibility was that all participants had to have experienced the phenomenon being explored. More specifically, for an individual to be eligible to participate in this study, the following must have applied at the time of recruitment:

1. The individual must be a current counselor education student at an institution accredited by The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) or CACREP equivalent counseling training program,
2. The individual must have completed a live practicum experience,
3. The individual must be seeking a master's degree in counseling, and
4. The individual must have verbal proficiency in the English language.

Counselor education graduates were excluded from this study in order to refine the sample to individuals currently experiencing counselor training and their potential for impact on present interpersonal relationships with important others. The immediacy and currency of these potential changes were both essential to the study's outcome. The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs or CACREP equivalent counseling training program accreditation was a necessary inclusion criterion that supported homogeneity of the sample in the areas of consistency of education, training, and clinical experience on the part of CIT participants. Although these factors obviously varied dependent on the participants' training program, the idiographic of IPA allowed for the exploration of individual experience of how counselor education programming influenced relationships. For counseling programs to attain and then maintain this accreditation, counselor education departments must continuously satisfy a variety of course, practica, staffing, and student-evaluation criteria. This study reserved participation eligibility for those individuals who had completed a live practicum experience in order to ensure that participants possessed an equivalent level of training to one another in their progression through counselor education programming. Individuals in master's in counseling tracts were considered for study eligibility. Finally, due to limitations of the researcher inclusion criteria required that participants possess verbal proficiency in the English language.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection was carried out through the administration of one 60-minute interview with an optional second follow-up interview with participants for the purpose of confirming individual participant themes which the researcher generated from interview findings. Each participant was individually delivered this primary, semi-structured interview guided by open-ended questions to allow for flexibility and depth in participant response. Interview

questions explored in a narrative sense select interpersonal relationships prior to and then during participants' experience of counselor training (Appendix B). As part of the consent process, participants were informed of and agreed to the audio recording of their interview. These recordings were later transcribed by the researcher for further analysis.

The initial interview began with the completion of a demographic questionnaire, requesting the following information of participants: (a) name and preferred pseudonym, (b) age, (c) gender identity/preferred pronouns, (d) affectional identity, (e) any additional identities which feel relevant to the participant, (f) relationship/marital status, (g) counselor education program title (h) placement in program (i.e., semesters completed/remaining), and (i) any counseling experience prior to counselor education training (Appendix C). Participants were informed that the answers to these questions would be linked to their chosen pseudonym to protect their confidentiality when describing study outcomes. It was also explained that participants were not mandated to provide any of the requested demographic data to be eligible to participate in the study.

### **Data Analysis**

Interpretative phenomenological analysis has provided a general guide to data analysis; however, the process suggests flexibility on the part of the researcher while emphasizing data immersion. Such an immersive experience was accomplished through the researcher having repeated, intensive contact with the data. With this goal in mind, the research process addressed the initial stage of data analysis through the transcription of each participant interview's audio-recording. This necessitated the researcher thoroughly engaging in repetitive reading of interview transcripts, as well as iterative attention being paid to, and notes being compiled about, the interview recordings themselves. Notes made in reference to these interviews included the



researcher's observations and thoughts relevant to the interview experience, as well as consideration for significant comments voiced by participants. In this stage of review, the researcher focused on language use (both syntax and diction), content/context, and the researcher's own initial interpretation (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Within the IPA data analysis process, the next stage involved a movement away from transcribed information and toward an examination of the researcher's notes in anticipation of gleaming emerging themes. The mandate of the researcher at this point was to develop concise phrases and terminology which provided a broader conceptualization of said participant themes yet simultaneously captured each participant's story in unique detail (Smith et al., 2009). It is important to note that in abiding by IPA tenets, the researcher was tasked with coding transcripts for theme exploration while simultaneously conducting ongoing interviews with other participants. In this way, the interview process was constantly undergoing refinement as new information, patterns, and clarification of research scope were discovered during the concurrent coding.

The final stage required that the researcher analyze connection among participant themes discovered from the prior stage, with an awareness of conceptual similarity. Like themes were then grouped together and attributed a descriptive label (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Here themes were culled due to overlap, poor fit, or minimal data support, resulting in a final list of major themes, sub-themes, and sub-topics. Excerpts from transcripts supporting each theme were compiled along with a codebook offering the location of the excerpt by page and line number in order that excerpt context may be sought for confirmation or reference (Smith et al., 2009).

## **Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research has relied upon a study's trustworthiness to ensure the rigor of the study's execution. Said trustworthiness is composed of four main elements: credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability (Morrow, 2005). Credibility in qualitative research has been defined as how accurately the findings of a study represent the views of participants. Transferability has attended to how easily a study's findings can be applied to alternative populations and settings. Confirmability has considered whether study findings can be corroborated by other researchers. Dependability has homed in on the study's capacity for consistency in duplication.

### ***Credibility***

To espouse credibility, the researcher faithfully employed peer debriefing, external auditor, member checking, and negative case analysis. Through peer debriefing the researcher consulted with a peer around the research process and emergent themes; the researcher consulted with a peer around the researcher's own experience of and potential bias in study execution. The peer debriefer for this study was a practicing licensed professional counselor. These consultations were undergone to ensure the participants' experiences were accurately and comprehensively represented. By incorporating an external auditor, the researcher worked with a party objective to the study whose responsibility was to review transcripts and confirm/deny the researcher's thematic conclusions. The external auditor for this study was a Counselor Education and Supervision graduate who was experienced in IPA methodology. Member checking consisted of following up with participants post-interview once coding occurred and potential themes were finalized. These themes were offered to participants for their review and feedback. Using negative case analysis, the researcher included and spoke to any findings contrary to the

primary themes in an effort to fully display the diversity of participant experiences. Exploring negative cases served to more distinctly define those primary themes as a result of the contrast offered in comparison.

### ***Transferability***

To promote transferability of findings, the researcher utilized rich, thick descriptions. The researcher incorporated descriptions which were detailed, robust, and thorough so as to convey as faithfully as possible the participants' experiences. Thematic findings were presented with direct participant quotes to accurately and definitively support theme selection. Providing readers with rich, thick descriptions allowed access to a wealth of detailed information so that transferability could be functionally assessed.

### ***Confirmability***

To increase the confirmability of findings, the researcher utilized a bridling journal. The researcher documented their own personal experience of the research process to map out the various steps taken so that the study could be meticulously replicated. Bridling journals are used to help create an audit trail which documents the decisions made throughout the research process, as well as the justification behind said decisions (Watt, 2007). These records helped to identify and address personal reactions, ultimately leading to a reduction in potential bias. This journal was for the use of the researcher only.

### ***Dependability***

Morrow (2005) described the ways by which dependability is established through credibility, as discussed above. In addition, the bridling journal discussed under confirmability was used to create an audit trail, a necessary element in solidifying a study's dependability.

### **Trustworthiness within Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

Means to ensure trustworthiness in qualitative research have been widely discussed and agreed upon by a variety of pundits in the field (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Morrow, 2005). Smith (2011) addressed specific criteria for quality in IPA methodology, first emphasizing research adherence to theoretical principles, including idiographic, hermeneutics, and phenomenology. The study had to demonstrate adequate sampling to produce sufficient data for theme selection justification. In addition, appropriate transparency was required to clearly illustrate to the reader the researcher's actions. Furthermore, study analysis had to be understandable, reasonable, and engaging. Smith (2011) continued to delineate the elements of a "good" IPA study, including strong data, rigorousness, space dedicated to theme exploration, provision of interpretive analysis, identification and discussion of convergence/divergence, and a thoughtfully prepared write-up.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Because research inherently creates a specific role and power paradigm between researcher and participant, it was critical to the integrity of this study that strict ethical guidelines were adhered to throughout. Wester (2011) delineated parameters for the execution and subsequent publishing of ethical research, describing the primary principles as follows:

1. Participants and their personhood must garner the highest respect from research staff, necessitating a full disclosure of study intent, methods, and dissemination of findings with research staff receiving each participant's informed consent to participate in return.
2. Participants must be granted absolute autonomy over their decision to participate and their individual contributions.

3. Participant identities considered to be vulnerable must be honored and fiercely protected by research staff.

4. Participant risk through involvement in the study must be deliberately minimized by research staff to the furthest extent possible so that the benefit of involvement outweighs any remaining risk; social validity, the concept that the value of a study's findings justifies participant involvement, must also be considered here.

5. Participants must be treated justly, promoting the equitable distribution of any benefits and/or risks associated with study involvement.

Although the participant population sought for this study would not be considered innately vulnerable and the nature of the study itself did not demonstrate considerable hardship, there was always the possibility that participants would be exposed to risk through their very involvement. The researcher was therefore tasked with risk mitigation and management, establishing and adhering to a research design that followed ethical standards, monitored and responded effectively to participant experiences, and provided resources and referrals as needed upon study conclusion. These conditions will be further expounded upon below.

### **Terminology**

Language was critical to the administration of this study's demographic questionnaire in that it allowed participants to accurately and safely self-identify in terms of their age, gender identity and preferred pronouns, affectional identity, relationship status, and any additional identities which felt relevant for the participant to share with the researcher.

### **Recruitment and Screening**

This study incorporated purposive sampling procedures. Generally, the goal of qualitative research sampling has not been to obtain a representative sample of a specific population, but

rather to seek participants who “provide key insight and understandings” of the phenomena (Abrams, 2010, p. 537). The sample size of IPA studies has been small to allow for detailed case analysis in order for participant stories to be fully appreciated and so researchers may “concentrate more on depth, rather than breadth of the study” (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 9). Although there exists no consensus among IPA researchers regarding optimal sample size, Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) suggested a sample size of six to eight participants so that participant similarities and differences may be examined while not simultaneously overwhelming the researcher with data.

In order to seek out a sample of appropriate size and composition which abides by the inclusion criteria dictated previously, the researcher contacted numerous U.S. counselor education departments. Throughout the recruitment and screening processes, the researcher used transparency and disclosure in order to comprehensively explain the study’s intent and any potential requirements of selected participants (i.e., time commitment). The researcher described inclusion criteria to each applicant and based the sample selection process on these criteria. Because of the challenges inherent in ensuring privacy when relying upon electronic means of communication, in all aspects of this recruitment and screening process the researcher practiced strict confidentiality with applicant information.

### **Consent**

In accordance with the University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board (IRB; Appendix D) requirements for research and the 2011 American Educational Research Association (AERA) Code of Ethics, all eligible participants progressed through a thorough informed consent process which outlined the expectations, risks, and benefits of participating in the study and necessitated signed agreement on the part of the participant (American Educational

Research Association, 2011; Morse, 2019). Participants were provided the informed consent in a straightforward comprehensible manner avoiding complex language and terminology to promote the greatest degree of understanding. Participants were encouraged to bring any questions or concerns to the attention of the researcher throughout both the informed consent and study processes. Participants were informed that they could elect to opt-out of continued participation in the study at any time.

Although the focus of this study did not intentionally expose participants to any undue risk, Wester (2011) emphasized the importance of clearly outlining both potential risks and benefits to research participants prior to study commencement. In this study participants were asked to discuss personal relationships with important others and, as with any exploration into relational dynamics, participants risked experiencing complex and uncomfortable emotions during and/or following the interview(s). In order to mitigate this risk, the researcher provided the participant with support in locating mental health resources in their area, including “Counselor Find,” provided by the National Board for Certified Counselor, which assists individuals in finding local mental health providers (Appendix E).

In acknowledging the potential for risk, it was the researcher’s hope that participants would experience benefits from their involvement in the study. As with possible drawbacks to participation, potential advantages to taking part were thoroughly explained to participants during the consent process. Through a thoughtful, coordinated exploration of specific interpersonal relationships, participants had the potential to reach a greater understanding of these dynamics and feelings of confusion or misunderstanding around relational dynamics may have entered a degree of catharsis. Deeper insight into participants’ counselor education experiences on a broader level was likely and participants could have enjoyed an increased

awareness of their own personal growth and professional development. Furthermore, through their engagement in the study participants may have recognized how their involvement in counselor education programming was possibly linked to an evolution in their own relational roles, previously viewed as unrelated phenomena.

### **Confidentiality**

Prior to the commencement of data collection, informed consent and a demographics questionnaire was administered to the participant. Information was provided regarding the nature of the study and efforts on the researcher's part to protect participant confidentiality. As part of said demographics questionnaire, the interviewee was asked to select a pseudonym. Following pseudonym selection, all data collected was stored using this pseudonym alone to help insure participant confidentiality. In a separate encrypted document, a key of participant identifying information and associated pseudonyms was stored. This document was kept in a distinct file location upon the researcher's password-protected computer accessible only by the researcher. Interviews were recorded on two separate password protected iPhone devices; one device to serve as a backup should the primary device fail. Audio files of participant interviews were labeled by pseudonym, participant initials, and date the interview was conducted. To not pose an undue burden upon the participant and/or researcher, with consideration for participant preference and to accommodate COVID-19 protocol, interviews were held via Zoom computer platform. The virtual interviews were held in a confidential space and recorded using the previously mentioned audio devices only. Following the interviews, the recordings were transferred via data cable to the researcher's aforementioned password-protected computer and then promptly deleted from the recording device. Only the researcher had access to the audio files. The audio files were then transcribed verbatim and only identified by the participant's



pseudonym. Any identifying information (demographics, education program, university location, etc.) that may jeopardize confidentiality was removed from the transcript prior to it being shared with an external auditor for review. To further protect participant confidentiality the researcher was mindful in publishing study results, withholding statements and demographic information that may identify the participants. Participants were informed that all efforts toward maintaining confidentiality would be adhered to, however, anonymity could not be insured.

### **Dissemination of Knowledge**

Study findings faithfully reflect the individuality of participant contributions, a hallmark of the ideographic nature of IPA research design. These results will be shared with the participants themselves, delivered in English and through a means which promotes accessibility and understanding. Findings will be further shared with counselor education program faculty members through conference presentations and manuscripts in order to better support students in their training and professional growth.

### **Post-Study Support for Participants**

Although this study's focus did not intend to cause undue hardship to participants or to make focal participant vulnerabilities, the research carried out asked that participants share experiences surrounding personal relationships with important others. Such in-depth exploration of relational dynamics had the potential to cause participants to feel challenging, complex emotions throughout and following the interview process, emotions participants may have not felt equipped to manage independently. For this reason, the researcher's involvement in the interview and follow-up processes included responsive support. Although not requested, participants would have been assisted in locating resources for individual or group mental health

services, along with information, literature, and other available resources tailored to the participant's circumstances (Appendix E).

### **Conclusion**

By incorporating the in-depth and rigorous IPA methodology the researcher endeavored to illustrate the CIT experience of counselor education and subsequent perspectives around interpersonal relationships. IPA was founded in the epistemology of subjectivism, interpretivism, and constructionism with the goal of relating the participants stories and then draw meaning from these shared narratives. This aligns closely with the constructivist axiology found in the underpinnings of this study which recognizes that the researcher could not be separated from the research process due to the interdependent relationship between the researcher and the participant. For this reason, the researcher limited their influence and adopted a stance of transparency with the reader. Using brindling and the disclosure of the researcher's stance, along with the articulation of the researcher's values, beliefs, and experience related to the study, the researcher limited his influence upon the outcome of this study and provided transparency to the reader. Furthermore, the relativist ontology of this study allowed for the subjectivity of each participant's experience to be expressed, as well as the individual meaning-making of said experience. The inherent theoretical principles of IPA (phenomenology, idiography, and hermeneutics) further supported the conveyance of the participants' narratives to the reader. Additionally, the inclusion of reciprocal exchange, derived from social exchange theory's reciprocity, allowed for a theoretical lens that enhanced the understanding of participants' experience of interpersonal relationships prior, during, and following their counselor training.

Through the collection and interpretation of CIT experiences, the researcher sought to garner greater insight into the impact of counselor education upon the student in a broader, more

holistic sense, highlighting the influence of counselor training outside of the classroom. This insight provided useful information to individuals considering counseling training, current counseling students, and counselor education faculty in supporting student needs as they transition through the stages of counselor development.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

To begin, the presentation of findings in this study adhered to good practice as suggested by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research practitioners. Smith (2011) described the four criteria requisites for an IPA paper to meet the standard of “acceptable,” including the clear compliance to IPA theoretical principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography; sufficient transparency; “coherent, plausible and interesting analysis;” and adequate sampling volume to evince discussed themes (p. 17). This study followed the recommendation of “acceptable” IPA research conduct for a sample size of four to eight participants by incorporating three or more participant extracts for every theme offered when available. Some sub-themes did not arise in the narratives of at least three participants; however, the researcher deemed these sub-themes relevant to understanding the nature of the phenomena and were therefore included. This inclusion is not opposed to IPA principles and in fact supports the idiographic nature of IPA, thereby, the researcher viewed the incorporation of these sub-themes well justified. Further, this study complied with the standards for a “good” IPA paper by upholding a clear focus, supplying strong data, adhering to rigorousness, adequately elaborating themes, employing descriptive and interpretative analysis, examining both convergence and divergence, and writing with intention and care (Smith, 2011).

#### **Participants**

Seven participants engaged in this study through 1 approximately 60-minute interview via Zoom. Three of the 7 participants completed an optional, approximately 30-minute follow-up

interview also via Zoom. Additionally, two participants provided feedback regarding themes found within their respective interviews, corresponding with the researcher by email. Two participants did not respond to the researcher's efforts to contact them for either a follow-up interview or an email discussion around found themes. Participants were referred to by their self-chosen pseudonyms to promote anonymity. Participants completed an open-response demographic questionnaire (Appendix C) prior to the initial interview: (a) pseudonym (b) age, (c) gender identity, (d) pronouns, (e) racial and ethnic identities, (f) sexual, affectional, and romantic identities, (g) marriage or relationship status, (h) educational program, (i) mental health work experience, and (j) additional identities. John was assigned a pseudonym by the researcher due to him not including a pseudonym when completing the demographic questionnaire. Table 1 illustrates participants' demographic responses in their own words as space considerations allow.

**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Chris Taylor	Elise	Ella	Jackie	John	Lyndsey	Nicolai
Age	28	25	27	29	36	23	25
Gender Identity	Male	Female	Female	Female, Woman	Male	Woman	Female
Pronouns	He/Him/His	She/Her	She/Hers	She/Her/Hers	He/Him	She/Her	She/Her/Hers
Racial & Ethnic Identity	Hispanic, White	White, Caucasian	White, Caucasian, American	White	Caucasian	White	White, not Hispanic
Sexual, Affectional & Romantic Identities	Heterosexual	Polyamorous, Queer	Heterosexual, Heteroromantic, Somewhat Fluid	Bisexual	Heterosexual	Pansexual	Demisexual, Straight, Queer, Questioning, Fluid
Marital/Relationship Status	Single	Has Male Partner	Committed Relationship	Married	Married	Dating	Single
Educational Program	School Counseling	Clinical Mental Health Counseling	Clinical Mental Health Counseling	Clinical Mental Health Counseling	Clinical Mental Health Counseling	Clinical Mental Health Counseling	School Counseling

Table 1 (continued)

Pseudonym	Chris Taylor	Elise	Ella	Jackie	John	Lyndsey	Nicolai
Mental Health Work Experience	Behaviorist	Qualified Behavioral Health Provider, Client Care Coordinator	Crisis Line	Personal Assistant in Group Practice	Mental Health/Substance Use Disorder Intake Clinician	Practicum I	Undergraduate Internship in In-Patient Facility
Additional Identities	Adopted Child	Single Mother, Agnostic	N/A	Neurodivergent, Past Polyamory	Father, Christian, Non-Traditional Student	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ)	Chronic Digestive Illness, Trauma History

## **Presentation of Findings**

This study observed three superordinate themes derived from participant counselor training experiences, which the researcher describes as: (a) Confusion and Insecurity, (b) Growing Pains, and (c) Overcoming and Resilience. Relevant sub-themes arose in association with each superordinate theme. Findings include a summary of superordinate themes, corresponding sub-themes, and sub-topics and can be found in summary in Table 2. The prevalence of themes gathered from participant interviews is documented in Table 3.

### **Theme One: Confusion and Insecurity**

Initially, the superordinate theme of Confusion and Insecurity addressed the participant experience of struggling to integrate information and behaviors learned through counselor training into one's personal identities. This process involved indecision and confusion within interactions carried out with friends, family, and partners, characterized by CITs finding it difficult to distinguish between their personal and counseling selves. In practice, this tendency would often manifest in study participants incorporating counseling behaviors such as reflecting feelings, paraphrasing, challenging, prompting deeper reflection, promoting behavioral change, etc. when interacting interpersonally in non-professional, personal settings. Further, participants found themselves analyzing both themselves and others during non-counseling interactions. As such, participants described a state of self-reflection which did not end when CITs physically removed themselves from the learning environment. Not only did participants report difficulty in differentiating between their personal and counseling selves, but many also described becoming more concerned about the mental health status of themselves and important others. Often this awareness contributed to confusion in addressing their own wellbeing, as well as a heightened sense of responsibility for the mental health of friends and family due to their burgeoning



counseling identity. Such confusion and insecurity resulting from the integration of information delivered through counselor training frequently contributed to a need for validation from faculty, friends, and relatives to reaffirm participants' ability to develop as a competent counselor. This thirst for validation included confirmation of personal appropriateness for the counseling field and CITs seeking such often did so to alleviate any self-doubt which had arisen from the constant self-reflection and self-analysis prevalent in counselor programming.

### ***Professional and Personal Identity Integration***

With concern to navigating the components of one's identity, the contributions of CITs most readily aligned with three disparate yet overlapping experiences. Dialogue around general personal/professional identity exploration led, for many CITs, to the detailing of instances in which they had applied recently acquired counseling skills in their relationships with important others. This idea of experimentation was further reinforced by participants as they underwent a sense of solidification of their counselor identity, frequently occurring in coordination with their first counseling experiences with real clients.

**Table 2***Summary of Findings*

Superordinate Themes	Sub-Themes and Sub-Topics	
Confusion and Insecurity	Professional/Personal Identity Integration	
	Exploration	
	Experimentation	
	Solidification	
	Mental Health and Responsibility	
	Self	
	Others	
	Reassurance	
	Growing Pains	Relationship Imbalances and Disequilibrium
		Relational Depth
Reciprocity and Mutuality		
Relationship Expectations and Selectivity		
Dissatisfaction		
Relationship Dynamic Inversion		
Emotional Fatigue		
Loneliness		
Isolation		
Alone Together		
Diminished Connection		

Table 2 (continued)

Superordinate Themes	Sub-Themes and Sub-Topics
Overcoming and Resilience	Ruptures and Repairs
	Outright Benefits
	Increased Awareness
	Encouragement and Support
	Strengthened Connection
	Self-Prioritization
	Self-Efficacy and Confidence
	Self-Advocacy and Boundary Setting

**Table 3***Themes by Participant*

Theme	Nicolai	Chris	Lyndsey	Ella	Elise	Jackie	John
Confusion and Insecurity							
<i>Professional/Personal Identity Integration</i>							
Exploration	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Experimentation				X	X	X	
Solidification		X	X	X	X		X
<i>Mental Health and Responsibility</i>							
Self		X			X		
Others		X		X		X	X
<i>Reassurance</i>	X	X	X		X	X	X
Growing Pains							
<i>Relationship Imbalances and Disequilibrium</i>							
Relational Depth		X	X	X	X		X
Reciprocity and Mutuality	X	X		X	X	X	
Relationship Expectations and Selectivity	X	X		X	X	X	X
Dissatisfaction	X	X			X	X	X
Relationship Dynamic Inversion	X	X		X			
Emotional Fatigue		X			X	X	
<i>Loneliness</i>							
Isolation		X		X	X		
Alone Together		X		X		X	X
Diminished Connection		X			X	X	X

Table 3 (continued)

Theme	Nicolai	Chris	Lyndsey	Ella	Elise	Jackie	John
Overcoming and Resilience							
<i>Ruptures and Repairs</i>	X	X			X		
<i>Outright Benefits</i>							
Increased Awareness	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Encouragement and Support			X	X	X	X	X
Strengthened Connection			X		X	X	X
<i>Self-Prioritization</i>							
Self-Efficacy and Confidence	X	X	X	X	X		X
Self-Advocacy and Boundary Setting	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

**Exploration.** All participants reported acquiring an abundance of knowledge through their counselor training, a process which increased their understandings of self, others, and relationship dynamics. Elise expressed the impact of training upon her perspective:

I knew I wanted to help people. I knew I wanted to do therapy, but I think I had this, like, cliché: people are going to be on a couch and I'm going to be so smart and know all the right things to say. And then, you know, we started, like, the theories and the ethics, and I started kind of be like, "Oh, this is like a real profession." It's not just talking to people. Not in a way that I always had talked to people. And so, it just completely changed the way that [I] viewed human interaction. And just my outlook on everything in life is completely different now.

Mirroring Elise's experience of change, Ella expressed through the exploration of her personal and professional identities, she noted over the course of counselor training she "kind of slowly changed."

Related to said evolution and in connection with her experience in programming, Elise stated:

It's just really hard to learn, you know, such intense interpersonal skills and then not use them in your interpersonal [life] because it does, it does change you. I think it changes the way you communicate ... with people, even the [way] we listen to people.

In this way, Elise found that not only was she changing, the way she interacted with others changed as well.

As participants gleaned new, applicable, and powerful understandings of human emotion and behavior, many struggled with how to manage this recently acquired information. Jackie stated, "I can write essays all day long. I can conceptualize things. But it's been a lot of figuring out what, how to apply my knowledge, as well as a general personal discovery of who I am."

Furthermore, Elise continued to explore the confusion related to amassing knowledge in counselor training with little understanding of how to integrate these new gains:

You're having all this knowledge dumped on you with no direction. And so that's when I think a lot of students start struggling because it's, like, we're all diagnosing our family members, or we're all, like, recognizing these patterns in ourselves. And we're just freaking out, like, my whole life feels like I did not know any of this about myself or my family or my ... patterns.

Here Elise found her perspective of herself, and her family members, was impacted through her counselor training in a way that felt out of her control. Elise's exploration of her personal and professional identities did not feel straightforward, nor did she feel explicitly guided by programming to navigate this experience.

**Experimentation.** To continue, to master approaches and techniques learned in counselor training and to further integrate the personal and professional selves, a selection of participants attempted said counseling skills within interpersonal relationships. Jackie discussed her desire to try-on and hone what she was learning in counselor training in a low-risk setting, stating:

In some ways I think I wanted to practice on someone in a way that wasn't intimidating or really scary or threatening. Like, it's easy enough with a friend to be like, "Oh, you're going through a thing right now. We can, like, talk about it or I can challenge your thinking around this. And then [in] 30-minutes I can send you a stupid meme," and it's like you can go back to normal. It's just, like, wanting to use my therapy skills in a way that's less threatening than a practicum.

Jackie's experience of better understanding the interaction between her personal and professional identities included attempts at applying counseling skills with a long-time friend. In this way, Jackie felt assured the strength of their relationship served as a protective factor which, following her practicing techniques or approaches, would support their relationship in returning to "normal."

Adjacent to this perspective, Elise reported feeling she and her peers received a lack of guidance from their counseling program regarding the appropriateness of practicing counseling skills outside of her program, stating:

I was learning all these skills, but we didn't really go over, like, how to, how to keep it at school ... how to separate that from our personal life. I would be talking, and I would find myself just, like, reflecting feeling or reflecting meaning or whatever. And she was, or she would talk about an issue going on in her life. And I'm like, "Well, [name of

friend], you look at this pattern that you're engaged [in] again, you know?" And she was like, "[Elise], like, you're, my friend. Stop trying to be my therapist." And she would get so irritated with me.

Elise continued to describe her difficulty in learning "to turn it off" when connecting interpersonally, a problem she addressed by establishing a "safe word" with her friend, "so if she felt like I was analyzing her ... she would say the safe word ... and I would stop, you know, it was like, okay, okay. Okay. I'm going to give you advice instead." Through these discussions, Elise noted relationship conflict resulting from her use of counseling approaches and techniques in interpersonal relationships.

Conversely, Ella viewed her application of counseling skills with family as a positive experience as she navigated her personal and professional identities, expressing:

I don't think it's necessarily a bad thing. I think people feel really comfortable with me and they, because of my ability to, like, create space for people and to give this really kind of nonjudgmental permission to be who they are. I think a lot of people feel really close to me.

In this instance, Ella felt through her use of counseling skills her relationships with family were strengthened, yet noted a caveat, "it creates a little bit more of a one-way relationship sometimes, and that can be a struggle when I don't feel like it's reciprocated." Ella perceived her family experienced closeness to her due to this application of counseling skills, although at times she sensed it created conditions in which her own needs were unmet.

Transitioning away from actively practicing counseling approaches and techniques, Lyndsey discussed how the skills she acquired over time had become second nature, manifesting automatically in personal interactions. As she navigated her personal and professional identities,



Lyndsey described her initial difficulty responding appropriately as a counselor when interacting with her client in practicum which created a delay while she formulated a “counselor” response. In time responses became more natural and fluid for Lyndsey in the counseling relationship, eventually overflowing into her interpersonal relationships: “I would say in my everyday life that I started like automatically like doing emotion reflections and content reflections.” Lyndsey explained further, describing how her new “automatic go-to is to state, like, the emotion first” when supporting a friend who is struggling before entering “problem solving,” something she “probably wouldn’t have done before” she engaged in counselor training.

Here, as Lyndsey navigated her personal and professional identity differentiation, she observed her behavior in relationships had transitioned from immediate problem-solving to that of emotional support and validation. Lyndsey found throughout the process of practicing newly acquired counselor skills in relationships with important others that these connections were ultimately strengthened and made healthier.

**Solidification.** Finally, several participants acknowledged how clinical experience was a significant contributor to their counselor identity development and refinement processes. To begin, Lyndsey shared, “I think a huge milestone for me was when I ... worked with my client during [practicum]. I was like, ‘Oh, I’m actually capable of, like, doing the thing’.” Similarly, John recounted his first counseling experience in his training program, stating: “That was the first time I ever got to actually counsel. And I was like, you know, like, I’m actually doing this.” Further elucidating this point, Chris supplied additional evidence of counseling experience being a central factor in his professional development and his differentiation between personal and counseling selves:

I would say, like, last Friday was finally, like, that ... eye-opener of, like, I'm a counselor. You know what I mean? Throughout the entire program, I looked at it from a psychological lens where it was, like, I'm conceptualizing people, not per se, like my client, you know ... throughout the entire program, I really didn't have that experience until I was able to practice it within my [internship] organization.

Additionally, Ella acknowledged her burgeoning counselor identity as a culmination of numerous experiences throughout her counselor education:

There was a lot of all these, like, reflective assignments that we had to do that I think kind of slowly over time built my understanding of, like, what it means to be a counselor and ... what it means for me to be a counselor. So, I think it was kind of a process of, like, little moments that helped me understand things.

Ultimately, when considering the process of navigating personal and professional identities of CITs, it is important to conceptualize how these students receive vast amounts of diverse information and applicable skills early on in the learning process yet may lack adequate context for the application of such powerful gains. This in turn created challenges for many participants in terms of integrating newly acquired counseling knowledge both personally and professionally. Understandably, these circumstances seemed to result in some participants analyzing themselves, others, and their relationship dynamics, as well as practicing counseling skills within said connections with important others. These factors related to counselor identity development had varied impact within participants' interpersonal relationships. Direct counseling experience through practicum and internship settings often furnished an opportunity for CITs to both contextualize and apply knowledge and skills learned via coursework, strengthening and clarifying counselor identity development.

### ***Mental Health and Responsibility***

Taking into account said knowledge and skills, many participants felt because of such gains they now held a greater responsibility to be a representative of the mental health field in non-professional relationships. These CITs detailed the introspection and confusion which often characterized changes in how they viewed their own psychological wellbeing. Others described the challenges and occasional conflict which arose in instances in which participants acted upon a perceived responsibility for the mental health of important others.

**Self.** With growth in counseling-related learning, several participants developed increased concern for their own mental health status. The augmentation of mental health knowledge requisite within counselor training, in conjunction with the maturation of their counselor identity, compelled some participants to experience confusion in regard to the responsibility they may hold in addressing the mental health struggles they saw within themselves.

To begin, Chris disclosed challenges with personal mental health and expressed his feeling that as a master's student he "needed to just be something new, something different." Sharing the impact of counselor training upon his own psychological wellbeing, Chris described the impact of taking a Lifespan and Development course:

So, I knew a lot of the information already, but for some reason in this class I started reflecting on my past traumas and, you know, developmental pattern[s] and for some reason I, it just didn't click like it did, like in this class before. And when I really started to analyze myself and pick myself apart and be like, you know, that's why you got like this and that's why you do this because of this button, you know. Failed relationship[s],

you know. Parents ... you know. It's just kinda going down that hole. It kind of fucked me up.

Counseling coursework initiated deep reflection for Chris, causing him to explore himself and his relationships patterns in a new light which he had difficulty resolving. Chris was challenged with how to address personal mental health concerns and in order to manage these feelings he sought support from faculty, an attempt at clarification serving to lead Chris into a greater sense of confusion:

I'm diagnosed ... and I'm not on medication or anything. There's sometimes where things just get a little bit out of control for me, you know? But, like, initially when I first started this program, it was like, "Tell us what's going on. Like, tell us, you know, if you're going through stuff or whatever." And of course, like, I started to, and then all of a sudden, most of my professors were like, "Don't tell us now. [We] don't want to hear that."

Wanting to act in a professionally responsible fashion, Chris turned to faculty for support around his challenges related to personal mental health as a counselor-in-training. However, because Chris experienced inconsistent receptivity he felt his trust in and relationships with faculty were impacted. Chris's experience of his own psychological state also collided with how he conceptualized a prototypical professional counselor, giving rise to discomfort and a desire for his instructors' understanding:

I want to let you all know this is a real mental health crisis that I go through every once in a while. And I don't want it to affect my professional life, but that's kind of how it feels, is that I have to uphold some type of status to, in order to be a counselor.

Chris conveyed a sense of helplessness in his difficulties with addressing his own mental health and relationship challenges despite his ever-evolving counselor knowledge, training, and skills:

I have found the keys to the chest or whatever. Like, I have to look for this treasure and, like, if I don't find it, that means ... I don't fit the criteria for a good counselor or whatever. There's some tendency of, like, wanting to fix ourselves. Like, we feel like we have the ability to fix ourselves and it's sort of selfish in a way that we come into this program, like, all right, I can figure things out. I know I can figure it out. Then we figure it out and then all of a sudden we can't apply it, you know? It's tough.

In this way, Chris felt pressured to maintain adequate counselor "status" in terms of mental and emotional stability and expressed feeling frustrated to apply what he was learning in counselor training to his own experience. Similarly, Elise detailed her experience of counselor training being in conflict with the mental wellness of counselors-in-training, stating: "I think the environment feeds into perfectionism. I've had professors where like the, the standard is excellence and that's, what's expected of you. [So] make it happen." Through the course of her training, Elise came face-to-face with personal and interpersonal hurdles she found she was only able to surmount with the help of personal therapy and the support, encouragement, and authenticity of other students and faculty. Through such intention and commitment, Elise's feeling of responsibility for her own mental health activated her drive for personal change. With the increase in concern she now held for healthy relationship patterns, a perspective gained via time as a CIT, Elise turned her attention to dysfunctional interactions with her then-partner:

I got divorced during my grad program because we were learning, oh, this is what healthy boundaries are, [what] healthy relationships look like. And I was like, "Oh, like I don't have that. I don't have that in my marriage." I couldn't, I couldn't unsee it, you know, it

was like drinking from the fountain of knowledge or whatever. I couldn't unsee toxic or unhealthy patterns in my life. So that was fortunate and unfortunate, I suppose.

Here, Elise articulated encountering a sense of obligation, a need to take appropriate action in her marriage. Due to an aversion to the implied hypocrisy of working with clients toward health promotion when this was not her present lived experience, Elise decided she could no longer neglect her own emotional, mental, and relational wellbeing:

It's the practice-what-you-preach kind of thing. I did not feel authentic, okay, in my interactions with clients. If I would go in and talk to a client that had an emotionally abusive relationship and encourage them to set boundaries, and then I'm not doing that myself in my personal life, I felt like I could not be authentic in my interactions with them. So, I had to adjust that.

In this way, Elise's sense of responsibility for her own psychological wellness appeared to bleed over into her counselor identity, and vice-versa. Elise ultimately felt in order to have the greatest amount of integrity in her relationships with clients she needed to challenge her own blind spots and actively demonstrate in her own life the very same sincerity she encouraged with clients.

**Others.** Despite both Chris and Elise feeling compelled to make personal mental health-related changes as a consequence of the knowledge acquisition they underwent as CITs, other participants encountered complexities regarding their role in the treatment of important others' psychological wellbeing. Exemplifying this finding, Ella described her confidence in taking on a specific counseling role in supporting her older sister through a difficult mental health situation:

I almost had to kind of take on, like, a crisis reactor, crisis role. It almost felt like I was, I don't know, like, some kind of, like, soldier infiltrating behind enemy lines kind of thing. Yeah, there was definitely, like, a little bit of, I don't know if I could call it, like,

counseling professionally role-taking, but there was definitely this sense of, like, I have to be what the situation calls for.

Similarly, Jackie related harboring a sense of responsibility when engaging with her long-time friend:

He has definitely, like, mental health concerns and always has as long as I've known him. I have always felt inclined to want to make it better for him. But I used to not know entirely what to do about it. I just feel more obligated to do something, to help him with his mental health when I can, or when it's relevant.

A further example of a perceived obligation to support an important other was shared by John in his desire to address his partner's mental health needs and the sense of powerlessness he met in being unable to do so:

Whenever something would break, like the air conditioner, [or] something it would trigger her to have another panic attack. And that's how I was able to track down what caused this response. I was able to verbalize it to her. This is a really good example of, like, putting to practice what we learned. And I wasn't able to, like, help her, and the first time she had a panic attack, and I wasn't able to help her. I felt really, like, bad about myself [and] was like, "How can I, if I can't help my wife, how can [I] help someone else?"

Here John struggled to successfully support his partner's mental health needs and this not only felt "bad," the dynamic also called into question for John his potential competency as a counselor. While such feelings of responsibility impacted John's view of himself, Elise's experience of finding her mother's behaviors aligned strongly with the clinical criteria of a personality disorder heavily impacted her connection with this important other: "I went from

being able to look at my mother as my mother, to mixing this clinical view of her with the personal view I had of her before. And I couldn't, I couldn't separate the two." This new perception of her mother fomented conflict for Elise on both personal and professionally levels:

It was so frustrating because I couldn't, I know I couldn't address it. I knew that she did not have the knowledge that I had and, and I couldn't, it was unethical. It would be unethical for me to try to teach her, or do therapy on my mom, you know? So, it was frustrating because I was just stuck on this with this knowledge of like, oh my God, I know exactly, you know, why she's having these behaviors or why she's like this. And I can't do anything about it. I have to keep acting like I'm ignorant.

Elise's relationship with and her perception of her mother was impacted by the information she had gained throughout counselor training. She was met with a strong desire to support her mother's mental health yet felt powerless to do so. The confusion produced by this dilemma caused Elise to briefly detach from the relationship: "I [had] to have some distance from this because it was, it was trippy, honestly. And so, we didn't speak for a while because I couldn't separate [the clinical and personal views]."

In conclusion, many CITs struggled to determine if, when, and/or how to assimilate the knowledge, perspective-shifts, and skills they had gained through programming. This frequently caused participants to feel uncertainty of their role in relation to the mental health status of both themselves and important others. Several participants contending with their own and others' mental health questioned their overall appropriateness for the counseling field. Others strove to navigate their responsibility, and reconcile their personal and professional roles, as an evolving CIT when concerns for mental wellness arose among important others. The process of establishing their role and responsibilities in addressing personal/others' mental health statuses



altered the relationships CITs engaged in both with themselves and with others. Some participants felt they had successfully addressed mental health needs within said relationships, while others felt powerless to do so.

### ***Reassurance***

Counselor training can often feel overwhelming for students. Participants described the process of seeking validation from others to alleviate personal doubts around their potential to develop into competent counselors. Such insecurities included concerns around the possession of requisite counselor qualities/characteristics, the capacity to appropriately incorporate and apply counseling skills and knowledge, the navigation of personal exploration and growth, and the ability to persevere in the face of counselor training challenges and obstacles. Participants reported reaching out to friends, family, fellow students, and faculty for validation around their professional growth.

First of all, in articulating her experience of this transitional process, Lyndsey conveyed the importance of the support received from a more experienced CIT who, over time, became her close friend. Lyndsey epitomized the most valuable aspect of their relationship to be the “unconditional support, like, her always being there when I need it.” Expounding upon said support, Lyndsey added:

In practicum, there was one point that my client, like, no-showed and they’d never no-showed before. I was really anxious ... I was like, “Oh, they’re never going to come back to session.” I was texting that to [name of friend]. And she was like, “No. Like there’s probably, there’s most likely a reason why she didn’t come. Like, she seems to really like you, really trust you, [she] likes talking to you. Like, I have a feeling that she’s going to come back.”

Along similar lines, Nicolai utilized her relationship with her sister to glean the support, reassurance, and validation she needed at a point in her counselor training, noting some important limitations to this approach:

When I'm overwhelmed about a test upcoming or ... some of my, like, counseling techniques, I know that I can get honest feedback from her. Like, in some cases, if I overextend my, I guess, like, want for validation, sometimes she'll be honest. Like, "I told you a million times, so I'm not going to sit with the conversation again and say, 'You know, you're going to do this.' Cause you know. You did. So, like I, I've told you all the time that that's, that you did fine, so you probably did fine." So, so just like honest, emotional support, I think.

Although Nicolai sought out and received encouragement from her sister around her capacities as a burgeoning counselor, this important other presented with a lower threshold for the anxiety Nicolai experienced as a component of her counselor training. The character of the reassurance being offered to Nicolai demonstrated authentic support with specific, expressed limitations, contrasting greatly with John's narrative. John described feeling at times relationally unsupported in his pursuit of a counselor identity due to his partner's concerns around seeking her own mental health support to address personal concerns:

She's always been anti-therapy. ... Yeah, she's never been a therapy type of person. So, you know, "Do you believe in what I'm going to school for?" She would say, you know, "Of course I do, and I know that you're going to be great at it, [it's] just not [for] me."

Transitioning away from Lyndsey, Nicolai, and John's solicitation for validation from friends and family members, other participants sought reassurance through authentically engaging supervisors and faculty, relying on these academic and professional authority figures to

convey the humanness of the field and reassure said CITs that they need not be perfect.

Exemplifying this perspective, Elise shared:

I think, last week with my supervisor, and I said, you know, “I just I really don’t like this client that I’m working with, and I know that’s something I need to work through.” He said, “Maybe the guy is just a dick.” It helped because you’re, again, you’re taught in the program ... I have to constantly work through the way I feel about my clients, but, you know and he’s like, “You can still be a good counselor and think that guy’s a dick. You don’t have to be Mother Teresa about the way you feel about people.” And it was helpful.

Furthering her argument in support of imperfection, Elise expressed how faculty “owning that they’re human” felt incredibly affirming for her own self-efficacy throughout training. Elise explained how faculty’s openness and honesty regarding their humanness “encourages us to be open and honest” about the counselor training experience. Along parallel lines, Nicolai expressed an interest in receiving validation and a recognition of her humanness from faculty, going so far as to describe this factor as a critical support for counselors-in-training as they face the challenges of their academic program. When prompted as to what faculty could do to better reassure and empower students, Nicolai described just such reassurance, stating:

Advocate that your students have what it takes and to give them more credit. But to also recognize that we’re complex beings and that our relationships aren’t theirs. So, I think, be a more receptive advocate. I think that’s probably the best advice I would give to staff.

Lyndsey contributed to the conversation of how faculty can support students in terms of support and validation, remarking:

More reassurance. Not that they don’t give enough. [My practicum supervisor] is the best ever ... [he] always reassure[s] me that like, yes, you were using the right skill. Like, yes

you are able to do this. And I think that helped a lot, but there's so many students [that] have imposter syndrome.

Here Lyndsey shared how validation within the supervisory relationship help provided comfort and assisted in facilitating her counselor identity development.

Participants sought the reassurance of either friends, family, fellow students, and/or faculty to help assuage personal doubts regarding their experience of counselor training. These relationships acted as a valuable support in comforting participants and increasing their self-belief as related to their ability to attain counselor competency.

In closing, it must be emphasized how the development of counselor identity through the course of training created a transitional period for participants in which they strove to make sense of counseling knowledge, skills, and behaviors and how to incorporate these elements into their personal selves. This condition contributed to participants trying on their counseling selves in their personal lives in an effort to integrate the personal and professional aspects of themselves. As their counseling identity grew, participants encountered role confusion in their interpersonal relationships. Through this transitional period participants experienced discomfort and apparent anxiety regarding their capabilities and/or their overall appropriateness for the counseling profession which they sought to alleviate by seeking reassurance from important others.

### **Theme Two: Growing Pains**

Following the initial experience of role confusion and both personal and professional insecurity many CITs reported, participants described a broad range of challenges, obstacles, and upsets within important interpersonal dynamics which appeared to characterize relationships in a transitional sense. These experiences seemed to be commonly perceived by participants as

unpleasant, uncomfortable, and even painful. Growing Pains, instances wherein hardship, unease, and discomfort arose during periods of change, development, and adjustment, were present for these participants as they engaged in their relationships with important others. Challenges resulting from CITs progressing through their academic programming was categorized as the following: relational imbalances and disequilibrium, and loneliness.

### ***Relational Imbalances and Disequilibrium***

To start, participants described changes in interpersonal dynamics which reflected a sensation of imbalance, instability, or unequalness. Through the course of counselor training, students experienced relational transitions which manifested in a variety of ways. Some such relationship adjustment included a greater awareness of and/or desire for change in the depth and reciprocity or mutuality within relationships with important others. Yet other transformations involved the shifting of relational expectations or greater selectivity in establishing or maintaining close connections. Some participants expressed dissatisfaction with their enhanced awareness of relationship dynamics, a product of counselor training. In effect, these CITs described mourning the simplicity of relationships prior to their own counselor knowledge acquisition process. Many participants reported a shift in esteem in terms of how important others viewed them as a consequence of their advanced education, resulting in an elevated status within interpersonal connections which disrupted the equilibrium established prior to their commencing counselor training. Additionally, participants described the relational impact of the emotional exhaustion stemming from the rigors of being CITs, a fatigue which permitted limited energy expenditure within relationships with important others. The personification of Growing Pains differed among participants, yet all who experienced interpersonal disequilibrium noted the discomfort and emotional anguish such change could cause.

**Relational Depth.** Nearly all CITs mentioned concerns around relational depth with their closest connections, frequently describing frustration and disappointment in their search for greater intimacy, authenticity, and honesty in relationships with those around them. Navigating the pursuit of greater intimacy in connections with others, Ella outlined a succinct encounter in which she felt relational depth was not a probable outcome. In doing so, Ella explained the process of gauging these potential friendships, deciding ultimately that the caliber of relationship she was most interested in would need to be sought elsewhere:

It just kind of became clear that, like, I had nothing in common with these girls and they're perfectly nice and perfectly sweet. And I was really happy that they invited me, but I didn't put any effort into, like, making anything else happen because it's just very clear to me that, like, we're very different people and we have different values and want to do different things with our time.

The potential in these relationships felt unsatisfactory to Ella, allowing her to be both grateful for their welcome and content with the friendships not progressing further. But while selecting one's intimate connections with care may feel obvious in considerations of relational depth, what if one is interested in growing the strength and authenticity of an existing relationship?

As he progressed through his counselor training, John described recognizing how the process of he and his partner learning about one another and creating a deeply intimate interpersonal connection had been postponed or interrupted by important milestones in the creation of their family. John reflected on the first five-years of their marriage being a "fairy tale," an exciting, whirlwind time during which their three young children were born. With John's commencement of counselor training, however, his understanding of his relationship with

his partner grew and he began to view the early years in his marriage as a period in which neither he nor his spouse had the time or opportunity to get to know each other more deeply:

[The marriage] was great and you know, we had our ups and downs, but it was good. But it was also a little bit more surface-level. We're still getting to know each other. I knew my wife more pregnant than I knew her not pregnant. I didn't know who she was as not a pregnant woman, you know, for a long time.

Comparing his current relationship with his spouse to that of earlier years of their marriage, John expressed an appreciation for the enhanced intimacy the couple had worked to achieve. John acknowledged the necessity in strengthening the connection he had with this important other, doing so by seeking greater relational depth. It is important to note that recognizing a need for and then attaining said depth is not an obvious, simple, or straightforward transaction.

In conceptualizing the challenges typical to relational transition, Chris expressed both recognizing he needed greater intimacy and authenticity within existing connections, and attempting to apply said increased depth:

I felt a sense of connection when I was satisfied with having these relationships that ... might be considered superficial. Like they're meeting this need at this time. But now that I have, like, this perspective shift, I want something different out of my relationships and something that's less superficial. And my old friend group can't necessarily, either they can't meet that need or they don't want to. So, I feel this sense of disconnection.

Further exemplifying the complexities inherent in seeking greater intimacy in connections with others, Chris described his historical tendency toward "superficial" relationships, his growing dissatisfaction with this surface-level engagement as a product of counselor training, and his

challenges with successfully attaining what he saw to be more appropriate, authentic, and satisfying intimacies:

I think that's how all my relationships were, to be honest with you. All my relationships were very superficial. That's a good way to put it. I never gained any substance out of it unless we were doing something, like, wild and crazy. That's what I actually, what I'm working through right now in counseling is that I'm having difficulty maintaining meaningful relationships or even healthy relationships since the start of this program. I just haven't been able to do it. Every time I try to start one it's like, it just ends badly or it doesn't go ... the way I want it to. I don't know if it's just because I'm completely restructuring the way that I think, or the way that I do things. And then people just don't match up to that anymore.

Here Chris discussed the obstacles and frustrations he was meeting in attempting to “restructure” the ways by which he connected with important others. Having learned through his counselor training about the elemental components of “healthy relationships,” Chris sought to establish and maintain such heightened connections within his new relationships and to build on and strengthen the surface-level connections within his existing relationships. This process proved difficult, resulting in Chris desiring a specific caliber of intimacy but feeling barred from achieving it.

Counselor training compelled diverse interpersonal adjustments for many participants, including frustrations with relational depth. Other CITs credited their acquisition of counseling knowledge as a process which differentiated them, thereby increasing their vulnerability to feeling exploited by their close connections.



**Reciprocity and Mutuality.** Taking this sensation of imbalance a step further, the majority of participants expressed fatigue and discouragement at the absence of reciprocity and mutual give-and-take in said relationships, feeling as though they committed or sacrificed greater energy or time than they received. Participants felt that their natural capacity for offering empathic listening and interpersonal support was also resulting in them feeling used for these and other newly acquired counseling skills by those close to them. These individuals expressed dismay and unequalness around the sensation of being taken advantage of for qualities of their personality and burgeoning professional identity.

Chris's relational experiences as a CIT bring this most immediate point home. Throughout the interview process, Chris described instances in which he felt his recently acquired skills and professional identity were alternately rejected and abused, the former intensifying sensations of isolation, the latter leading to Chris feeling taken advantage of by important others. Despite intensely desiring interpersonal connection while progressing through the program, Chris grew wary of others' intentions:

And then the people that do want to talk to me because I am a counselor, it's like, they're only using me because I'm a counselor. You know what I'm saying? Like they, they're using me because they know that I'm going to listen, that I'm going to want to, you know, just be there for them in general. And then I have to make that boundary of like, no, like that's not what this relationship is. And then it never works out.

Beyond the pain and disappointment of feeling used, Chris's experience demonstrated an attempt at boundary-setting, an attempt to correct such role conflation. Unfortunately, in the relationships in which he has attempted this means of self-advocacy, Chris described a disheartening lack of success in relationship sustainability post-boundary. As a result of this challenging experience,

Chris articulates wondering whether he is now “overly defensive,” feeling as though “everyone’s out to get [him] or something.” In attempting to mitigate both the sense of being used and attempting to protect himself from such an outcome, Chris explained further frustration in his attempts to set a positive tone in burgeoning connections, again experiencing a lack of reciprocity:

I almost take that upon myself to be, like, all right, I’m going to ask everyone. I’m asking you how you are. Can you at least ask how I’m doing? You know what I mean? There was always like that piece of, you know, “Look at me. I’m over here, too.” But no one does that, that’s the thing. It’s just kinda sad.

Similar disappointment and a striking lack of mutual give-and-take is described by Ella in relation to specific family members. She introduces the relationships as inherently uneven: “[Although] a lot of my extended family ... feels really close to me ... I don’t necessarily feel that same reciprocation.” Ella goes on to articulate the intimacy limits of these connections, explaining how such imbalances can foment negatively valenced feelings on her part:

[I]t creates a little bit more of a one-way relationship sometimes, and that can be a struggle when I don’t feel like it’s reciprocated. So definitely in situations where like, you know, maybe if I’m talking to a cousin and we’ve been talking about them for like two hours, I start to feel a little bit resentful because they’re like not interested in me

As a CIT, Ella’s awareness around relational imbalances were piqued, going beyond her solely recognizing the uneven expectations present in the dynamic.

This growing attention to energy and time supply/demand considerations in interpersonal relationships was further referenced by Jackie through her remarks around perceived imbalances in many of her long-term connections. Jackie explored “how much effort [she] was putting into

friendships or various relationships, and what [she] was getting out of it,” describing a willingness to accommodate, allow, and contribute in her close connections to a greater extent than what others appeared willing to accommodate, allow, or contribute to her. This created a dynamic in which Jackie found herself “feeling like [she] had to try for something, like try to maintain their friendship or try to maintain like their attention.” Just as counselor training served to bring this inequality to stark relief for Jackie, progressing through the program informed how she chose to manage the experience:

But I think in some ways I would just remind my past self to acknowledge that getting into a field like this and to the mental health related field, kind of encourages that behavior and friends to want to seek mental health related education, advice, whatever. And to just kind of be aware of that.

By recognizing others’ natural inclination to approach those they perceive as expert for help and support, Jackie was able to understand this tendency toward relational imbalance. Although not applauding or approving of such behavior, Jackie’s perspective was to both expect and plan for it, thereby potentially eliminating some of the hurt and frustration which can come of involvement in an unequal partnership.

Many CITs expressed a sense of feeling “taken advantage of” by others through the utilization of or reliance upon participants’ skill for empathic listening and nonjudgment, to the detriment of participants’ own relationship needs. For those CITs who struggled to address this relationship imbalance, a sense of isolation, frustration, and resignation arose, leading many participants to adjust with whom and for what reasons they elected to enter into or remain within interpersonal intimacies.

**Expectations and Selectivity in Relationships.** Adjacently, nearly all CITs described disequilibrium in having increased emotional and psychological expectations for those with whom they engaged in relationships, subsequently heightening their demand for relational intimacy and sincerity within the relationships themselves. As a result, most of these participants described augmenting their selectivity process in the close relationships CITs elected to engage in and strengthen. These individuals reported acknowledging a need to eliminate less healthy connections and to dedicate greater intentionality to those relationships they believed would better mutually satisfy expressed needs.

In expounding upon upheaval endured in terms of relational loss and gain throughout counselor training, Elise clarified important expectations she now held for important others, including others' harboring a requisite acceptance for the counseling profession and a willingness to engage in therapeutic services when appropriate. Elise remarked on how she "struggled in [the past with] feeling responsible for other people's emotions," and as a consequence of her current training in counseling she now insisted upon important others seeking out professional mental health support to help manage "friendships, relationships, family stuff, whatever," instead of assuming Elise would take on such a role. Regarding this perspective shift around expectations and selectivity, Elise went on to describe how through her counselor training:

I think you form a criteria in yourself for what relationships are worth working through things and what relationships are the ones that aren't ... I mean, it's essentially: what are your deal breakers, right? What are the things that you can, and can't live with in your relationships? And I think once you become a professional [counselor], that list gets smaller. Which is a good and a bad thing.

Similar to Elise articulating her newfound need to seek “relationships that were, like, refilling [her] cup per se,” John remarked on his evolving commitment to cull new and existing connections which did not appear to have the potential to satisfy specifically expressed relational needs. Reflecting on changes in his relationships with important others, John emphasized a new interest in keeping his social circle small and vetting potential candidates based on qualities and values he found necessary for relationship sustainability:

I’ve been finding that I’ve been kind of looking at people differently in that aspect. I’m trying, trying on new friends and seeing if we can get to that place. I’ve done that. But they definitely have to be able to go to that place of authenticity. And you know, if you can’t then I just don’t feel like we can ever make it to that level, that deeper level.

John described viewing his engagement with others through a new lens, one which helped him determine the degree of intimacy possible and whether said degree would meet the standards he had identified for himself as a CIT. He expressed this selectivity process as somewhat experimental (“I’m trying ... on new friends”), leaning into his own intuition around the potential satisfaction a burgeoning connection may provide. But whereas John’s perspective on expectations was in many ways highlighting his intention for future relationships, Nicolai brought a more retrospective outlook to the dialogue, sharing awareness around indicators of historical personal change:

[W]hen I’ve reflected on my relationships with people, if I’ve changed in a negative way, for who I know that I am, that tells me that that relationship is actually hurting me. And, like, if I’m changing negatively ... then I need to not let that continue.

Here Nicolai articulated criteria around the cessation of existing, less-healthy connections, a theme reflected in much of her interview. Nicolai identified how going through counselor training

had supported her in “recognizing when [she] need[s] to absolutely cut a relationship out” versus instances in which she feels the connection is worth deeper investment. Ella’s perspective coincided with Nicolai in the recognition of needing to terminate unsupportive or unproductive relationships:

I get more impatient faster especially with people who talk a lot about themselves or who don’t give me the time or attention that I need. I get pretty impatient ... I usually end up just kind of letting that relationship go.

Following counseling training, most participants developed a decreased tolerance for relationships which did not fulfill their interpersonal needs. Heightened relationship expectations contributed to heightened accountability of others and greater motivation to discontinue unfulfilling relationships. Further, participants approached the formation of new relationships with greater discretion, viewing the relationship prior to investment through the lens of a cost-benefit analysis in terms of emotion, energy, or time. Still other CITs found that their increased awareness of such shifting dynamics amounted to a loss of relational “innocence,” thrusting many relationships into a confusing disequilibrium.

**Dissatisfaction; Ignorance is Bliss.** Another commonly cited interpersonal experience of instability was represented by participants in feeling they had lost innocence through the process of personal, academic, and professional growth. Where before entering counselor training an individual may have found a specific relationship adequate and acceptable, they now more readily noticed flaws or potential growth areas, creating a sense of dissatisfaction, and leaving them wonder whether “ignorance is bliss.”

With this in mind, in explaining the dynamics of her relationship with her older sister, Nicolai readily described instances in which her newly acquired skills and level of personal

awareness seemed to make what had once been a relatively obvious and smooth connection feel awkward and “more clunky.” Nicolai connected these developments to personal growth she was undertaking in terms of assertiveness and boundary setting, stating between she and her sister:

[We] did have a moment where things got really escalated and emotions were running high and ... there was, like, almost a want to go back to old ways and like fall back on old habits, rather [than] engaging in the mature way that we’ve developed over time. And so I do feel, like, there is some pushback, there is some conflict for that relationship, that it’s not super smooth right now. And it’s not, it’s not as, like, a positive connection as consistently as it used to be.

Nicolai’s recognition of the shift in personal perspective experienced by CITs as a result of what they were learning and undergoing academically and professionally was mirrored by Elise in both her relationship with her partner and her parent. Elise shared feelings and thoughts related to divorcing her spouse during her progression through counselor training, connecting this decision to having gained a greater understanding of “what healthy boundaries are” and how they appear in practice. She went on to explain realizing:

I don’t have that. I don’t have that in my marriage. I couldn’t unsee it, you know. It was, like, drinking from the fountain of knowledge or whatever. I couldn’t unsee toxic or unhealthy patterns in my life. So that was fortunate and unfortunate, I suppose.

Feeling both empowered and distressed by the seemingly automatic application of new skills and perspectives continued for Elise outside her marriage. In her relationship with her mother, she described a similar sense of lost innocence, of feeling she could not return to a time when she did not see the world through a counseling lens:

I went from being able to look at my mother as my mother to mixing this clinical view of her with the personal view I had of her before. I couldn't separate the two. Again, it was like once I knew I couldn't unknow it and it impacted heavily our interactions ... If we would have an argument or something, or my mom would do one of her erratic behaviors previously, I would just be like, "Oh, mom's being crazy. She'll be over in, you know, a week." And then [now] I would be like, "Mom is having a BPD meltdown." I couldn't, un-label it. Even now with my mother, like the clinical stuff's still there, you know.

In this way, Elise felt no longer able to view her mother from a more simple, less psychological or analytical angle. Her participation in this relationship felt characterized now by a counselor perspective and this clinical lens challenged Elise's ability to relate as a daughter or family member.

Moving away from the newly realized dissatisfaction in familial connections, Chris contributes to the dialogue in recounting both his and his cousin's, a trained counselor, experiences longing for the simplicity of many pre-counselor training friendships. Chris expressed similarities between he and his cousin's relational experiences with friends and peers, articulating:

[S]he's very depressed and always anxious because she feels like she needs to return back to the life that she once had. Because that was when she was, like, at least superficially happy, you know what I mean? She felt like she was happy and might not have been healthy, but, like, at least there was something there.

In speaking to the emotional and academic rigors of counselor programming for both himself and his cousin, Chris described mourning a lack of simplicity and casualness in friendships. Chris expressed a wish for dynamics to be "a little more surface level" or "easy going," instead of the



seemingly requisite demand for “intense” depth and extreme authenticity he felt characterized most inter-peer interactions. Attributing this loss of innocence to expectations of personal growth emphasized throughout his counselor training, Chris further elucidated a desire to return to a time prior to counselor knowledge acquisition when he felt less discomfort:

I know I’m not the only one who has went through this, but it just doesn’t seem like I’m ever going to be able to get back to that point. You know? It doesn’t. It just seems almost impossible because I have changed so much and that need of wanting to just feel that comfort again, of the past, sort of disrupts that.

Despite attempts to recognize these developments as healthy and the necessary growth of his counselor identity, Chris felt conflicted about the positiveness of these changes. With greater knowledge and understanding of human behavior, thoughts, and feelings, combined with his own enhanced self-awareness, Chris at times struggled to view newly acquired counseling skills and perspectives as predominately beneficial.

Many participants expressed a sense of lost innocence due to their having adopted a more psychological lens in their understanding of human interaction. Such a perspective, thought by CITs to be a direct consequence of the knowledge and awareness gleaned through their training experience, added an unwanted element of complexity to interpersonal relationships with which participants felt forced to grapple. Many participants found their new awareness to impede their ability to return to the comfort and flow which once characterized said connections. Others found their personal reputation shifted toward greater esteem within interpersonal relationships, with these participants articulating how their increased education and skills allowed for further imbalance in historical connections held with important others.

**Relationship Dynamic Inversion.** Nearly half of all participants remarked on what appeared to be a dynamic “inversion” with an important other, i.e., amendments in status or social currency which accompanied the CIT’s progression through their graduate program appeared to alter a previously held hierarchy or interpersonal constellation within the relationship. Participants who endured disequilibrium described instances in which their experience and contributions as CITs greatly altered how they were perceived and treated by an important other, catalyzing a dynamic shift in the relationship which often led to the participant holding a role found to be some combination of new and prized and/or foreign and uncomfortable.

In describing the sibling dynamic Nicolai and her older sister had come to share over their lifetime, this participant expressed feeling as though this important other both supported and believed in her abilities. Prior to Nicolai entering counselor training, their relationship was in many ways characterized by Nicolai’s older sister’s deployment of tough love and application of “some accountability,” as well as intuiting “when to push [Nicolai]” and “when to just be there.” In this way, Nicolai experienced the relationship from a more acquiescent perspective, her older sister often assuming the active or directive role in the dynamic: “Before I was much more of a passive person in the relationship, where I wouldn’t challenge her as much when things, like, when there was more tension, and we would butt heads about things.”

Conversely, throughout the process of Nicolai becoming a CIT, her and her sister’s lifelong relationship construct was inverted. As a product of Nicolai’s intentional boundary setting, along with growth in self-confidence and self-awareness, the dynamic gradually transformed:

I'm also a participant in that relationship and not just the recipient in that relationship. That's really helped me to make that, that relationship seem more, more balanced. I think it's definitely still in a growth period ... where the dynamic is changing. I think we're both seeing that I am also independent ... and how [my independence] engages with that relationship as a connectedness rather than [as] an independent person. Like two independent people in a relationship together and how that actually looks, versus [having] a dominant person in that relationship.

Speaking of the newly defined role in her relationship with her older sister, Nicolai described a sensation of "balance," of coordination, cooperation, and deliberate attempts at equity. On a very similar wavelength, Ella shared her experience of inverted relationship dynamics as had also occurred between her older sister and herself as she moved through counselor training. In articulating aspects of their siblingship since childhood, Ella characterized a closeness founded upon mutual support, understanding, and intentional connectivity. The purported evenness of this dynamic shifted with Ella's development as a CIT, resulting in a relationship in which Ella's expertise was frequently looked to or relied upon by this important other:

I think I kind of was able to take almost a more, like, expert ... role in our relationship because, you know, I could kind of talk about things with more authority or I could, I probably had a little bit more like confidence or, or, like, sense of self through our conversations. Or maybe more me really starting to come into my own and to make really big strides toward conventional ideas of what it means to be successful. And almost being able to take on a more authoritative, authoritative place in our relationship because it's, like, I now have a degree and I can now say things with it. Like, I've noticed that both my mom and my sister will kind of like cite me as a source for things sometimes.

Here Ella explained ways by which she recognized her academic and professional pursuits had drastically altered the shape of the sibling dynamic she shared with her older sister. Where before the two had viewed each other through an egalitarian lens, Ella's involvement in graduate-level programming seemed to be accompanied by an increased perception of clout and expertise on the part of her older sister.

Although Ella's experience exemplified her being perceived with augmented esteem by this important other, the ways by which counselor training inverted the dynamic between Chris and his best friend demonstrated a decidedly different tone. The interior changes Chris was undergoing as a CIT did not feel as understood or welcome within the friendship, shifting the relationship between the two parties and causing a dynamic inversion rife with discomfort:

I guess in just the way that he acted towards me of like, "Oh, you're successful now. Like, you're big time. Like you're, you're doing something great with your life while I'm over here fixing upholstery on cars." And I'm like, "Oh dude, like, I just took, like, a different route," sort of thing. So, I guess in a way, like, being put on a pedestal at least in societal terms of like, "Oh, this person is successful," and I'm like ... success is such a broad term, you know? I would say that was the biggest change that I saw is that he just started treating me differently. Just being like, "Oh, like, you're way smarter than me now," which in, in my eyes he's been smarter than me our entire life. You know what I mean? Like when he brings up, like, physics questions and things like that, I'm, like, blown away and want to know more, you know. I just don't understand that kind of stuff.

In recounting this anecdote, Chris illustrated a dynamic inversion with his best friend which felt based on Chris's progression through graduate-level programming. Despite Chris's clear admiration and reverence for his best friend's own professional expertise and areas of interest,

Chris felt his journey as a CIT had become an obstacle and a point of contention within the relationship.

While some participants reported appreciating relational changes due to others' perception of increases in expertise and the esteem associated with graduate education, others were made acutely uncomfortable by such shifts in interpersonal dynamics. All CITs describing this experience, however, noted the destabilizing qualities of such changes. A further imbalance articulated how the act of being utilized or perceived as a counselor by important others could be mentally and emotionally draining, resulting in CITs feeling depleted and unable to adequately rest.

**Emotional Fatigue.** Finally, because of their training experience, several participants recounted feeling challenged to remain constantly “on” as empathic listeners and thoughtful contributors in their relationships with important others. This intrinsic expectation to remain intentionally aware and to constantly view the world through a counseling lens caused emotional fatigue for many and for some even feelings of rejection.

This aspect of interpersonal discomfort was explicitly explored by Chris as he discussed how “exhausting” it was to “uphold some type of status” in terms of his evolving professional counselor identity. Chris’s experience centered around the premise that the counselor skills he was acquiring and the self-awareness he was developing, albeit powerful and potentially of benefit, consumed a great deal of energy and felt in many ways difficult to control and unwieldy.

[I]nitially, especially with all my relationships, I was very, I guess, the same term that I used earlier but, overanalytical of people. I would conceptualize every single person. Like, couldn’t turn it off. Now I try to turn it off, but then now it becomes an issue because it’s, like, all right, now I can’t turn it back on when I’m at work. You know what

I mean? Like I've turned it off too much. So, I'm trying to figure that out now where I can turn it off and on. Kind of a flip of the switch, which I don't know if you ever can get to that point.

Here Chris described not only the emotional fatigue made manifest from overapplication of counseling skills, but he also articulated feeling overwhelmed and overcome by the decision-making process itself, asking when and in what settings was it appropriate to refrain from employing a counseling lens and how to “flip” said “switch” in a way that did not also contribute to energy expenditure. This desire to “turn it off” for one's own benefit and self-preservation was similarly reflected by Jackie as she elucidated the changing dynamic with her close friend:

[T]here are times when I, like, just don't have the emotional bandwidth to do it, to be more therapeutic. And if he has problems, sometimes I'm just like, “That sucks.” Like I just don't have it in me at that time for various reasons to do that. And then, and there's this, like, added layer of me withdrawing from the relationship because I'm emotionally exhausted by my classes, or my practicum experiences, [or] my own stuff. So, I would say I withdraw more often, too, because I'm either busy or emotionally drained

Jackie described having acquired the capacity to be more therapeutically available to her close friend, but because of the intensity and energy expenditure requisite in such an endeavor, tiring quickly. In conceptualizing this dynamic, Jackie recognized not only how it emotionally fatigued her (“I withdraw.”), but also how her exhaustion and subsequent disengagement impacted her close friend's feelings and his overall experience of their encounter. Furthermore, the emotional fatigue of “being on” often felt one-sided for Jackie, with her stating: “I can't pull teeth to make our relationship work. I don't have the capacity for it.”

Not necessarily feeling appropriately equipped to manage emotional fatigue without relational fallout, Elise also described scenarios in which she was challenged to sensitively and appropriately “toggle” her counselor skills application with important others. Desiring greater expertise on how to manage emotional fatigue, Elise articulated how her “coming into [her] counselor identity was a bit off-putting to [her] friends and [her] family” because of the challenges she experienced in learning how to dial back recently acquired knowledge and skills. Contrasting the counselor-in-training experience to that of a future doctor, Elise stated:

I almost wish we would’ve had a class on, like, this is how you turn it off. This is how you stop diagnosing your friends and family members in your head. You start noticing all these patterns. It reminds me of my friends that are in med school that, you know, their friends or family talk [to them] about being sick. They’re running through the scenarios in their head and that’s socially acceptable, right?

While a medical professional’s opinion may be welcomed or sought after from Elise’s perspective, her experience was her own growing expertise in the field of mental health served to distance herself from important others. Difficulties mastering counselor-skill and counselor-lens application led Elise to feel a sense of rejection within specific relationships, with Elise feeling as though what she was learning and how she was changing seemed to catalyze discomfort in and unappreciation from those in her social circles.

Although participants experienced a wide variety of Growing Pains relationally as they moved through counselor training, most articulated how changes in their interpersonal connections were frequently characterized by imbalance, instability, or unequalness. While many CITs expressed a newfound interest in greater relational depth, concerns with connectivity reciprocity and equality were also expressed. Expectations around relationship quality morphed

for many participants during their counselor programming, leading many to demonstrate increased selectivity in their connections with important others. Because of augmented awareness, which often felt imbalanced between the CIT and those in their relationship circles, some participants found themselves grieving the relational simplicity they perceived having lost because of changes in their personal outlook and demeanor. Still others noted the disequilibrium which resulted from relationship dynamic inversions as their role and position in historical connections transitioned while they progressed through programming, noting the emotional exhaustion which came from the altered demands of such interpersonal transformation. Growing Pains demonstrated diverse participant experience, illustrating relational imbalance and subsequent hardships as CITs progressed through programming.

### *Loneliness*

Furthermore, participants expressed Growing Pains born of feeling removed and misunderstood as CITs by those who had not undergone similar schooling in the mental health field. Such isolation left many participants to feel unheard and unseen by those important others with whom they had previously held close and comfortable relationships. This sensation was, for many, exacerbated by the disconnects they witnessed and endured among their CIT peers, leading some to experience the “alone together” phenomenon. In this way, despite being virtually or physically surrounded by similarly situated individuals who were enduring comparable challenges, CITs did not find engagement with their peers to be supportive or compensatory for said loneliness. For several participants, this evolving experience of alienation and detachment translated to both relationships within and outside counselor training, resulting in a feeling of diminished connection with important others. As a result of such “othering” and



insulation, a second category of Growing Pains shared by participants described the experience of loneliness.

**Isolation.** Because of the rigors within counselor programming combined with the various demands outside the school setting, several CITs articulated a feeling of isolation. For some this was self-imposed and a way to self-preserve and protect, while for others it was seen as a product of program design. Some participants described isolation due to confusion in balancing their counseling-self and personal-self, leading these CITs to create distance within relationships. From Elise's perspective, the experience of isolation was a product of esotericism; progressing through counselor training had provided her with skills and insights little-known to those with which she shared personal relationships. This disconnect enhanced Elise's experience of detachment from important others:

I know exactly, you know, why she's having these behaviors or why she's like this. And I can't do anything about it. I have to keep acting like I'm ignorant. Or like, I don't see these things that are happening. And I felt very lonely in that.

Despite of the caliber of relationship Elise described having with her best friend, in attempting to remain within her role as "friend" versus "counselor" Elise explained feeling trapped in a place of emotional distance. The two friends strove throughout Elise's progression as a CIT to adapt and refine their relationship so that it remained respectful and close despite the changes they were individually experiencing. That said, Elise's sensation of isolation persisted, not unlike Chris's experience of purposeful boundary setting which resulted in his feeling alone. To protect both himself and his important others, Chris committed himself to intentionally establishing parameters for where, when, and with whom he would apply specific counseling skills so as to not over deplete his "empathy battery":

And then when you do put up those boundaries, most of those people don't respect them. So then, you know, you go onto the next relationship or whatever. It becomes like this, I guess, puzzle and in a way, like what piece fits best for me? Most of the time, it's like none of the pieces fit best. And you're just like this lonely piece off to the side that doesn't even go into the box, you know?

Although Chris felt it necessary and healthy to create and maintain said boundaries, in doing so he repeatedly experienced the sensation of rejection within relationships. Specifically, Chris articulated how this showed up professionally through the lens of his counselor identity, detailing how his attempts at self-protection and self-preservation resulted in his feeling continuously more isolated from important others:

[T]hat, I guess, group or square of people that you used to get along with just keeps getting smaller and smaller and those opportunities to make those types of relationships happen gets smaller also because you're in a professional world, you know, it's, there are boundaries, there are, you know, things that you have to say or do in order to keep that professional status or whatever.

In this way, Chris's experience demonstrated the challenges inherent in integrating personal and professional identities so as to allow for safety and connection.

Conversely, Ella discussed how what she was learning as a CIT both distanced her from romantic intimacy and increased her desire for or reliance upon such connection. Isolation, as Ella described it, was born of having gone through the process of bolstering her relational boundaries, augmenting her partner expectations, and thereby increasing her relationship selectivity. Conflicted, Ella shared the sensation of being pulled in opposing directions with the

sensation of detachment being the ultimate experience. She described her relationship decision calculations by dividing her needs into thirds:

It was a third, “I liked this person.” It was a third, “I really want someone to date and to spend time with,” and a third, like, just not wanting to be lonely, you know. Kind of like wanting to be compassionate and also wanting to avoid loneliness.

Ella expressed her newfound awareness around relational health as a helpful tool which kept her emotionally safe while at the same time increased the degree of isolation she experienced when determining pursuit in romantic relationships.

Some participants experienced loneliness during counselor training which manifested as an experience of isolation. CITs associated this experience of detachment with the acquisition of esoteric knowledge, describing how their augmented awareness and understanding often served to distance them from important others. Participants who experienced such change discovered obstacles related to connecting in interpersonal relationships and articulated a clear sense of personal isolation. Many found that the experience of relational distance was not limited to personal connections but also permeated how CITs related to one another.

**Alone Together.** In continuation, the generally expressed isolation in relation to counselor training was further supplemented by experiences of feeling “othered” within counselor programming, as well. Participants described the construct of feeling alone together, that is, CITs moving through the training process alongside peers but feeling insulated and detached, unable to authentically connect with those in their courses and practicum experiences.

Participants like Ella and Jackie felt that particular dynamics of program design hindered their capacity to connect in long-term or sustainable ways with their peers. Jackie described her

experience on a satellite campus in this way, detailing feelings around having peers in similar circumstances yet feeling detached and alone:

I'm super over being in school. Like, just really, really over it. And a bunch of us have been so, like, very cheated, I guess, coming from the [satellite campus] because we are very much like the redheaded stepchildren of the [main campus] program. So, it's kind of left [us] to our own devices over there.

For Jackie, this sensation of alienation and distance was not counteracted by the establishment of an alternative community at her satellite learning site. Instead, she expressed feeling alone together: in the company of similarly situated individuals but insulated and unable to engage in a connective experience. Similarly, Ella's journey through counselor training felt colored by a sense of detachment and loneliness. This, she shared, was a product of necessary programmatic adaptations resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic:

The pandemic really did change everything and switching to an online program when we weren't ready for that did change everything. Like it changed my relationships with my classmates. I was in a cohort model and I really liked being able to like, you know, see the same people every day in class and to work with the same people. I haven't been in a room with those same people in a year and a half, and that blows my mind. Like, we spent all this time together and now all of a sudden we're completely, you know, I don't know what the word is, like, dissolved. But so, I think, I think a lot of my perspective is kind of warped by how the pandemic affected everything. I think it would've been totally different if I, if we'd been allowed to stay in person.

In describing peer-to-peer relationships as "dissolved," Ella, too, homed in on the experience of loneliness despite engaging regularly with similarly situated CITs. From Ella's perspective, her

counselor training's transition from in-person to virtual learning served to distance her from her peers both geographically/physically and emotionally/psychologically.

Further frustration in feeling alone together among peers was expressed by Chris as he navigated the process of establishing healthy, genuine connections with members of his counselor training cohort. Repeatedly Chris attested he “[knew he] wasn’t the only one” enduring this insulating experience, and yet felt unable to combat the culture of his program:

It can feel very isolating in a counseling program because you’re reflecting so much and you’re like, am I alone in all this? And then you try talking to people about it, but it’s like, we’re kind of all going through our own thing, you know? So, it’s just, it’s just tough.

Chris described struggling to “connect with” his peers and, despite the time spent together and the challenging coursework withstood alongside each other: “none of us really talk, you know what I mean?”

Feeling alone together was a phenomenon Chris saw not only from his own lived experience but also reflected in the struggles and frustrations of his peers. At the same time, Chris felt the reason behind such behavior could be related to a sense of intra-group competitiveness, a desire to appear as expert which ultimately translated to greater distance and a lack of trust between peers:

I know I wasn’t the only one, ‘cause it was literally happening to everyone. I think that’s partially the reason why ... none of us talk anymore, really. Like we tried talking at the beginning of the program, but then all of a sudden it became, again, like, the battle of the wits. Like, what is this person actually trying to say to me?

Here Chris articulated not just a sense of being alone among other CITs, he goes further and describes a culture wherein he felt peers prioritized ambition and academic prowess above connection and community. This dynamic left Chris feeling as though the individuals who could potentially best understand the hardships of his current circumstances were uninterested or unwilling to relate on this level.

Many participants expressed a sense of feeling alone within their training program despite understanding their peers were similarly positioned. The pandemic created barriers to accessing peer support, further exacerbating this experience of aloneness. Outside COVID-related impacts, CITs noted a culture of competitiveness among their program peers which created further distance and obstructed connection. Others felt a sense of programmatic neglect, expressing aloneness in their relationships with counselor training staff and faculty. Though the sentiment of being “alone together” permeated several participants’ experiences, the theme of loneliness was also demonstrated by some through the perceived loss of intimacy in current connections.

**Diminished Connection.** Most participants reported loneliness in terms of diminished connectivity with an important other during their experience as CITs. These occurrences were characterized by relational detachment or decreasing interpersonal engagement, which resulted again in sensations of loneliness and withdrawal.

Retrospectively, John shared thoughts around how he wished he had approached counselor training to maintain healthy and strong relationships with his children. When asked what advice he would give a future CIT, John remarked:

I guess it would be [to] spend more time with your family because, you know, my kids were young. Yeah. Some of those moments I am not going to be able to get back ... So, I

wish I would, you know, I was really kind of caught up in getting good grades, but I could have got decent grades and still passed.

When speaking of his role as a father, John frequently described the importance of his partner and their three children, acknowledging how necessary it was for him to commit time and energy to his counselor training yet mourning the time and energy he felt could have been spent in his roles as partner and parent. This sense of loss was echoed by Chris as he described the ebbs and flows of his relationship with his best friend. Chris articulated how through his evolving and development both personally and professionally through counselor training, the casual, straightforward, practical relationship they had shared was no longer satisfying in the same way and impacted their level of connectivity:

I've known this guy for, he's my best friend. Just to clarify, I've known him for 20-plus-years and prior to the program, you know, him and I were just kind of rambunctious dudes. You always get into nonsense. We had like a falling out maybe like six or seven months ago where it was, like, I was just kinda over him. Like, I was just like, "Dude, I, you know, I see you in a different light now and I kind of understand, like, what's going on. But, like, I don't know how to help you." It was just kind of draining, like, the relationship in general.

In large part, Chris attributed this diminishment in connection to, what felt like, the automatic application of newly acquired counseling skills in a non-counseling setting, describing how he did not "feel as connected to people as you were before." He went on to state:

I know some people are able to kind of break out of that. But, like, I have a really hard time just connecting with people at this point. Now I'm, like, overanalyzing them and like trying to conceptualize their life, you know, while trying to like, get to know them.

Instead of being able to focus his intention and attention on relationship establishment and strengthening, Chris felt inundated with data which distracted him from new connections and drew him away from historical ones.

Such application of counseling theory and perspective to existing relationships leading to a sense of diminished connection was similarly described by participants in their romantic partnerships. Elise shared her experience of her and her partner divorcing during Ella's progression through counselor training. Relating this relationship dissolution to her burgeoning understanding of boundaries as a CIT, Elise went on to describe how diminished connectivity separated many of her peers from people in their lives:

Oddly enough, a lot of my cohort went through breakups either the first year or the second year. And they said the same thing. You can try to, you know, change the dynamic, but, like, you can't change the person and they're not in the program with you. You grow apart. And there's only so much you can, you can do before ... that gap is too much.

In this way, Elise, like Chris before her, articulated the experience of increased aloneness and separation as a product of the shifts in self-awareness and perspective which accompany personal growth within counselor training. Despite the necessity and potential healthiness in ending ill-fitting relationships wrought with diminished connection, such upheavals were often characterized by feelings of loneliness.

Diminished connection with important others varied by participant, taking place between CITs and their friends, family members, and/or romantic partners. However, this loss of intimacy and relationship strength was consistently demonstrated, and participants attributed the experience to counselor training. Participants noted how programmatic time demands and their



training encouraging the integration of counseling skills/values/knowledge strained connection with important others. This reduction of closeness and understanding in interpersonal relationships lent to an overall sense of loneliness for these participants.

In closing, many participants found their personal and professional growth throughout counselor training prompted awkwardness, hardship, and emotional and psychological anguish along the way. These Growing Pains were made manifest as challenges and discomforts within the relationships CITs held with important others, creating an environment rife with the feeling of transition. Many described this scenario as one of imbalance, throwing previously homeostatic dynamics into flux and instability. These participants noted how their enhanced requirements for relational depth caused disequilibrium, with many acknowledging a feeling of being exploited for their newly acquired skills and perception. CITs mentioned how such imbalances led them to increase their selectivity in terms of establishing and/or maintaining interpersonal connections. Other participants described the disequilibrium caused by increased relationship complexity as a product of enhanced personal and professional awareness, with many articulating how said increases completely altered their role in relationships and effectively inverted interpersonal dynamics. A final destabilizing component of transition mentioned was that of emotional fatigue and the relational toll this could take on both CITs and their important others. Outside the growing pain of imbalance and disequilibrium, participants recounted the experience of loneliness, crediting it as a further challenge of this awkward growth period. For counselors-in-training, loneliness was often characterized by a feeling of isolation, both because of the esotericism of counselor programming and the related skills acquired. Isolation from oneself and one's important others was built upon by several participants who articulated the experience of feeling alone together within programming. In a chicken-or-egg-type paradox, some CITs noted

how they experienced diminished connection with important others, describing how delineated expressions of isolation and being alone together seemed to reinforce and exacerbate further detachment. In this way, participants broached the subject of Growing Pains, explaining how their experience of counselor training introduced both imbalance and loneliness to their respective relationships with important others.

### **Theme Three: Overcoming and Resilience**

Although many experiences shared by participants tended to describe the challenges and hardship inherent in training to become a counselor, it was equally valuable to recognize instances in which participants recognized and reflected upon more positively valenced take-aways from counselor programming. Acknowledgment of self-growth and awareness building was not uniform across participant experiences but did appear to align with three primary constructs: ruptures and repairs, outright benefits, and self-prioritization. Several CITs recounted experiencing temporary disconnects or fissures (“ruptures”) in their relationships with important others as they moved through the learning process. That said, these same individuals reported interpersonal growth and relationship restoration (“repair”), with all parties involved committing themselves to healing and even improving the mutual connection shared. The recognition and acceptance of a relationship’s need to expand and contract, ebb and flow, was central to participant’s experience of Overcoming and Resilience as they navigated their connections with important others. Furthermore, many participants described what they perceived to be outright relational benefits because of their learning and growth as CITs. Finally, participants discussed the necessity and the power of self-prioritization, detailing first how their experiences in counselor training helped to grow their self-efficacy and confidence in relating with others. This

recognition of self-worth and capability, in turn, led to many CITs committing themselves to a greater degree of self-advocacy and an enhanced respect for their own and others' boundaries.

### ***Ruptures and Repairs***

A number of CITs reported on the process of successfully overcoming difficulties inherent in creating drastic relational change as they progressed through programming. Participants described how their counseling identity development impacted connections with important others, including changes in interpersonal behaviors, expression of expectations and needs, and emotional fatigue, at times creating a sense of discomfort and distance. These CITs were not fazed or impeded by these relational changes, however, instead focusing energy and time toward the process of healing and developing alongside important others. Such individuals shared instances of ruptures and repairs: moments of intense interpersonal disruption followed by attempts at compensatory growth.

Frequently described here were the mechanics of CITs seeking a new homeostasis within established relationships, essentially experiencing the discomfort of disequilibrium in the process of seeking a "new normal." Because training in this field necessitates serious and intentional self-reflection, participants often described a sense of awkwardness in introducing their evolving self into established relationships. In describing changes in their relationships with close friends, both Jackie and Chris articulated the strain of these evolving dynamics, as well as their peace with said changes. In this way, Jackie explained her process of withdrawing from the relationship with her long-time friend at specific times, due to feelings of overextension and emotional fatigue. She went on to state:

Sometimes that happens and he's just like, "you're being kind of weird or something," although he is also really understanding of, like, me being in school and he's like, "I

know you have a lot going on.” So, it hasn’t really, really negatively affected the relationship, but I, I do think it has been a noticeable quality ... kind of like waxing and waning: how you talk to friends a lot for a little while and, you kind of, you both get busy and then you come back together to, to chat more. Catch up. Instead of, like, that normal kind of wax and wane of proximity. We have the added waxing and waning of, like, connectedness on a more, like, emotional level.

As a result of Jackie’s involvement in counselor training, she gained a new perspective on emotional availability and additionally began to recognize limitations in her own emotional availability in her relationship with this important other. Despite the discomfort or awkwardness such adaption appeared to cause, Jackie expressed understanding and acceptance for the changes, perceiving them as a natural part of the undulation of her connection with this individual. As mentioned, Chris’s bond with his close friend felt similarly tested, and in describing a recent “falling out” the two had experienced in the last year, Chris articulated the change he felt in their connection:

We hung out one time and honestly ... I’d have to say no, like, I don’t feel like our relationship is the same. Like, we’re just not in tune with one another like we used to be. And I’m not sure if it will ever go back, but he’s honestly my best friend. So, like, it’s hard to say that, it’s hard to say that I don’t think our relationship is the same. And I’m hopeful ... maybe some things will get cleared up.

Because of the closeness and long-term nature of their relationship, Chris felt conflicted in describing the bond as altered. Although he recognized there was a distance or a sense of discordance between them, Chris spoke of the belief he had in the relationship strengthening and healing from its recent rupture.

To continue, evolution and self-exploration, in both personal and professional senses, are powerful endeavors with the capacity to thrust long-established relationships into disequilibrium in their efforts toward a new, healthier version of homeostasis. Along these lines, Nicolai also articulated qualities of a changing relationship, hers being with her older sister. Like Chris, Nicolai was quick to acknowledge and identify the awkwardness and discomfort born of transition:

Like, it feels more clunky. You kind of, like, step through it together and then there's a little week where we feel normal again and then, you know, something might come up and it changes back to that clunky feeling. I have developed over time out of that young, naive person and into more of a, like, self-assured confident adult in that relationship ... I think [this has] changed, like, the perception and the way that, like, we each show up for it. But it's still such a new sensation that ... we don't come into it very comfortably yet because we haven't found how that fits.

Nicolai went on to describe her overall perception in reacting to ruptures in her connections with important others, stating:

And also having acceptance, if that repair work can't happen. And being okay with that change as well, that everything doesn't have to be mended. And there are certain people that you might not connect as smoothly with and that's acceptable, too. That's just growth in general.

In these statements, Nicolai illustrated the lens through which she viewed maturation and change interpersonally. Although it is not necessarily easy or natural, Nicolai described it as essential and spoke, too, of flexibility and deliberately refraining from attaching judgment or finality to the repair process when ruptures arise. By remaining open to all possible outcomes, Nicolai

demonstrated acceptance of the relationship's transition, satisfaction in maintaining neutrality, and an allowance for the siblingship to progress organically.

In closing, counselor training resulted in many participants experiencing interpersonal relationship change which, albeit unsmooth, felt surmountable. As CITs underwent shifts in their relational dynamics and interpersonal behaviors, relationships with important others often underwent a period of disconnect or rupture. Following this, participants noted an awkwardness in relationships which previously possessed a more natural flow. As a result, CITs endeavored to restabilize these relationships while upholding their own and important others' personal and relational needs.

### ***Outright Benefits***

Because counselor identity development is demanding and the training process is characterized by notable rigor, the determination to overcome and remain resilient in the face of such challenges is key to success. Although participants readily reported ways by which their relationships with self and others had been tried, tested, and forced to meet unexpected obstacles, and a recognition of these hardships is helpful and necessary, it is equally enlightening to discuss those gains CIT found to be entirely positive. Many participants described relational dynamic changes impacted by their training which they felt were solely beneficially, including an increase in awareness, the presence of encouragement and support, and strengthened connections.

**Increased Awareness.** One such instance of Overcoming and Resilience reported by all participants related to each CIT experiencing an increase in self- and other-awareness as a product of the training process. Although potentially heightening sensations of discomfort and unfamiliarity as a result of this augmented degree of consciousness and introspection, many participants found this undertaking ultimately beneficial and healthy. In this way, Chris remarked

on the requisite “element of growth” his counseling program emphasized, noting “if you don’t grow in this program, like, I think you’ve kind of missed the point of what this program is trying to teach you, which is insight and awareness.” This perspective was reflected by many of the CITs interviewed, with many describing specific examples of awareness augmentation they found helpful and influential to their relational experience. This process of beneficial other-awareness and awareness-of-others-in-relation-to-self was exemplified by John and the growth of understanding and insight he experienced in connection to his partner. In describing their relationship to that point, John explained how he and his partner had been together for 5-years, much of which time she had been pregnant with the couples’ three children. For this reason, John’s self- and other-awareness development because of counselor training was more focused on increasing the relational intimacy he shared with this important other:

[Y]ou’re different whenever you become a spouse. There’s a different piece of you that you haven’t been working on. I felt like my relationship changed and my relationship skills changed more than I changed. So really, for me, it wasn’t, like, as much self-discovery as [it] was, like, discovering who I am with my wife and other people ... [but] especially with her and especially as the newness [of marriage] kind of wears off.

Here John concentrated his burgeoning awareness on the relationship he shared with his partner, a relationship he felt he was able to explore more fully and at greater depth as a consequence of his enhanced perception and understanding.

With a similar application to close family dynamics, Ella expressed benefits due to her increased willingness to represent herself more faithfully and authentically with her mother, her older sister, and even herself:

I think I can be a lot more honest with my feelings than I did before. I know I haven't always been very good at [that] with my family. But I'm finding that I can be a lot more honest with how I'm feeling and thinking than I used to be. And also, like, kind of more aware of like my own deficiencies.

This self-reflective perspective was echoed by several participants, each of whom shared qualities or traits of themselves they had increased awareness around because of their experiences as CITs, remarking on relational impact. As such, Elise homed in on specific inclinations she saw in her romantic partnerships, even going so far as to determine potential origins for said tendencies:

I caught on to this pattern. I generally date avoidant men and I have an anxious attachment style. So, I can't be with avoidant men. It does not work. Right? Like, does not work. And then I was like, "Well, why do I have an anxious attachment style?" And I was like, "Oh. My mom." It just went ski slope so quickly. I was like, "Is my whole life a lie like this? This is insane. How did I not know any of this before?" It was wild.

Elise recounted the process of both discovering a personal quality or predisposition and walking it back to determine potential catalysts or relational influences for her present experience. In doing so, Elise demonstrated the benefits of the awareness augmentation process, recounting her initial shock and surprise followed by gratitude for new knowledge and astonishment it had gone unknown for so long. Another participant who reported intentional self-awareness expansion was Jackie, describing instances of helpful exploration and discovery in terms of her personal identity:

The thing that comes to mind is [that] the interrelatedness of holding certain identities has been really impactful to my relationships. This identity work over the last two years, like



in and out of school. Things that I have done to discover aspects of myself and identities that I hold, that has definitely impacted my friendships. Like, kind of something that always come up off and on between my partner and I, but after I took the human sexuality course we actually, like, tried polyamory for a little while and that definitely impacted my friendships. I mean, basically all my friends were like, “Cool, let me know how that goes.” And then discovering or becoming aware of being, like, neurodivergent, that’s been a pretty new thing ... I kind of delved further into that aspect and that’s definitely changed my friendships a lot.

By undergoing the process of counselor training, Jackie’s enhanced self-awareness allowed her to evaluate what type of romantic relationship more astutely that she would find most fulfilling. As with her exploration of neurodivergence, these components of Jackie’s identity had always been necessary, central pieces of her personhood, but the awareness she gained as a counselor-in-training gave Jackie the tools to better understand herself and how she engaged with important others.

In the end, the counselor training experience provided outright benefits to many participants, supporting them to generate greater awareness in both their understandings of self and their interpersonal interactions with important others. This growth led CITs to catalyze and maintain positive change in said connections, furthering participants’ ability to manifest their authentic selves.

**Encouragement and Support.** Many CITs spoke to experiencing encouragement and support in their connections with important others and how this served to both motivate and sustain the trainees as they overcame programmatic obstacles and demonstrated resilience in facing challenges. Such illustrations of faith and backing as found in these relationships enabled

participants to persevere through the rigors of counselor training and feel held, seen, and believed-in by those close to them. CITs who found their connections with important others characterized by such qualities perceived them to be outright benefits of the counselor training experience.

Lyndsey expressed the role of therapy and the support of other counseling students in enabling her to develop healthier relationship patterns with partners. She stated these support systems “helped me on my personal journey of, like, seeing my worth and seeing that, you know, I deserve better [in relationships].” Continuing Lyndsey explained “connections” with her counseling peers provided her with “people to reach out to,” helping Lyndsey to make significant change in transitioning from “toxic” relationships with romantic partners to now having the “most healthy relationship [she’s] ever had [with her romantic partner].” Here Lyndsey suggested that without her training, personal counseling, and the support of peers within her counseling program, Lyndsey would feel less equipped to make valuable personal and relationship change. Along similar lines, Elise reinforced the importance of engaging in supportive relationships as one navigates the complexities of their counseling program:

Every counselor kind of feels imposter syndrome at some point. I would talk to my peers, or I would talk to my professors. I felt, sometimes, I felt like they were the only people at the time that could understand me or what I was going through. [I] got very close to my cohort. I feel like I connect with other counselors and I feel seen and validated in a way that I don’t always have in my personal life.

Here Elise captured the uniqueness of counselor training in that it holds challenges which others outside of counselor training programs may have difficulty relating to. This created a void in support around training specific experiences. That said, Elise’s narrative demonstrated the

intense feelings of understanding and support she experienced in her inter-peer relationships, connections Elise relied upon for encouragement and motivation as she worked through counselor programming.

Transitioning from a conversation around support as sought programmatically, Ella noted her relationship with her sister as foundationally stabilizing as she traversed life challenges prior to and during her experience in counselor training:

We're really supportive of each other. We, we always kind of have been. It's really nice that there's someone in my life who has known me since childhood and who has gone through a lot of those pivotal experiences with me. Like, our parents got divorced and it was pretty ugly for a long time. So, we've gone through a lot together and there's kind of this sense that, like, we're always going to have each other's backs, which was really nice.

Through her elucidation of their siblingship, Ella illustrated the advantage of long-term relationships in navigating monumental transitions, including that of counselor identity development. Such relationships founded on common experience and exposure across time allowed for a sense of security during unavoidable periods of intense change as prompted by counseling training.

In addition, Elise supplied further evidence of the support and encouragement gleaned from long-term relationships by discussing her connection to a close friend:

I think her knowing me before I started a master's [program] and before, you know, I kinda, I [became] a professional, her knowing me before and loving me that way, the mess that I was. I still feel safe with her, too. If I need to fall apart ... I don't feel like I have to prove anything to her, which is different than it is in a grad program. [In a

graduate program] it feels like you're constantly trying to improve yourself. And I, I don't have to, I guess, be perfect around her because she's, she's known me for so long. Like, I feel safe. I guess I can be authentic with her. And it's, it's nice.

By comparing the affirmation and understanding inherent in this friendship to the expectations and feelings of inadequacy and pressure she endured as a CIT, Elise illustrated how powerful such support can be both personally and professionally. Elise emphasized the comfort found in the unconditional acceptance of her long-time friend as she worked through the discomfort and trying dynamics of counselor training, an endeavor which held expectations around satisfactory growth and development. In this way, Elise felt forced to satisfy a specific, programmatic understanding of self-improvement as required by counselor training, yet her friendship allowed an opportunity to purely exist without conditions of growth.

Ultimately, the encouragement and support provided by important others assisted many participants in overcoming the hardships and rigor of counselor training and remaining resilient in the face of change. The backing found in such relationships was perceived as an outright benefit and allowed participants to prompt positive change both personally and interpersonally. Additionally, connections founded upon understanding, acceptance, and assistance often provided a sense of security and comfort as CITs navigated the sometime turbulent training experience.

**Strengthened Connection.** Several participants remarked on how their development as counselors had helped to strengthen established relationships with important others overall, describing a deepening in closeness, understanding, and authenticity. These individuals viewed this outcome of counselor training as an outright benefit, articulating the ways by which the personal identity exploration and self-growth they were undergoing as CITs translated to

heightened intimacy with important others. For many participants, such strengthened relationships proved integral to the CIT's ability to overcome difficulties and maintain a resilient stance during unstable moments.

To begin, Elise described the enhancement of her connection to a long-time friend, linking this experience of increased closeness to the personal growth she had undertaken as a CIT:

I would say we're probably closer now than we ever have been. But it's different. The time the grad school consumes we don't get to see each other as much, but then when we do get to see each other it's like no time has passed. So, I, I think, and she grew up a lot too, so I think that was part of it, as well. The dynamic, I would say the dynamic's more mature now ... just we're all grown up and stuff.

Here Elise acknowledged the demands of her counselor training as having impaired her ability to spend time with her friend, yet the depth of the connection experienced by both parties only prompted greater intimacy and commitment to closeness in the relationship.

Along similar lines, John observed ways by which he felt his counselor training had helped strengthen the understanding and acceptance he co-experienced with his partner:

I related to her ... just be like, "Oh , it sounds like she needs this or that." Kind of like when you're listening to a client: they need this part of me. They just need me to listen. And so, it helped me in some good ways.

Moreover, John was able to use his therapeutic skills and broadening understanding to recognize his partner's needs in the moment and, thereafter, moving to meet said needs. In this way, John identified positive change in the relationship and areas in which both he and his partner were able to grow:

It enabled us to connect on a deeper level. My first year in the program, I really feel like I worked on my wife's empowerment. And I empowered her to not be, you know, it was kind of like she went through counseling with me, but it was different dynamics. It was just like it, but I empowered her to be more outspoken.

John noted parallel development for both himself and his partner as he progressed through counselor training. As John grew personally, he felt propelled to advocate for his partner, encouraging her to communicate her needs and experiences within their relationship. Consequently, John recognized his strengthened connection with this important other as an outright benefit of his journey as a CIT. John went on to describe a similarly enhanced connection with his close friend, describing the ways by which mutual boundary setting was helpful to both parties:

Our relationship's better now, it's getting better. And so really, we really were ... able to define, we had those conversations, we defined what we really value and what we won't put up with. We've kind of come to an understanding.

Here, John's narrative further indicated how his learning and skills-acquisition as a CIT directly resulted in what he saw to be healthy and positive relationship growth. By articulating and communicating interpersonal parameters, John and his friend experienced a strengthened connection in terms of both mutual respect and understanding.

Although all participants encountered challenges and obstacles in their endeavor to overcome, many homed in on outright benefits they received from the learning process. These CITs remarked on the increased awareness they had gleaned from experiences in their programming, recognizing how such shifts in perception and understanding helped them to better understand themselves and their important others. Another positive outcome of counselor

training shared by participants was the degree to which encouragement and support permeated their relationships, helping CITs to successfully maneuver through difficult personal and professional moments. Finally, participants remarked on the outright benefit of having strengthened their connections with important others because of what they were learning and applying in their counselor training.

### ***Self-Prioritization***

Nearly all participants expressed appreciation for the process of overcoming conditioned inclinations toward selflessness and learning to put themselves first, prioritizing their own interests in a way which served to better balance responsibilities and personal wellbeing. Although participants frequently confronted impediments to self-prioritization, most were strongly motivated to express their felt needs within their relationships. Participants demonstrated resilience here, learning to bend but not break in moments in which their mandate to self-prioritization was not respected. In this way, CITs articulated their relational journey as encompassing two primary foci, that of self-efficacy and confidence followed by self-advocacy and boundary setting.

**Self-Efficacy and Confidence.** Most immediately, participants mentioned recognized growth in terms of self-efficacy and confidence, sharing examples in which their experience of counselor training helped augment their own self-value and the degree to which they felt personally empowered. This heightened perception of self and one's own capacities impacted how CITs related to themselves and connected with important others. Participants remarked on ways by which insecurities around their goodness-of-fit as future counselors were gradually allayed as programming progressed, resulting in a recognition of competence and a stalwart belief in self. Despite the demands necessary to endure and the obstacles necessary to overcome

in order to successfully complete counselor training, Chris reflected on the mental and emotional distance he had traveled over the course of his experience as a CIT. In discussing the challenges and rigor of his program, Chris stated:

But ... that's okay. I'm all right with that. Like, that's kind of what I'm paying for. You know, I'm wanting to change in this program. I wanted to develop a different, not completely different personality, but just, like, just a new me, you know. Like, I wanted to grow in some area of my life and I knew that personally I was going to. So, I'm proud of that.

Here Chris's remarks homed in on how the hardships of counselor training felt directly tied to an increase in his own self-efficacy and a sensation of self-satisfaction around his accomplishments thus far. Expectations of growth were not only a tenet of Chris's program itself, they were also a personal expectation Chris appeared to have self-assigned. Throughout the counselor training process, Chris consciously and unconsciously established a litany of goals and anticipated outcomes for himself. It was through the achievement of said aims he experienced enhanced self-efficacy in his relationship with himself and his conceptualization of personal capacity.

Along similar lines, Nicolai articulated advice and feedback she wished she had received as a CIT, advice and feedback now laden with the conviction and self-worth Nicolai felt in relation to her learning and growth experiences:

Take a deep breath. Just keep going. And also give yourself more credit. Yeah, I don't think I would change too much or try to advise too, too heavily because I think, ultimately, I am where I am for a reason. I think taking a deep breath is always good advice. Stand tall and just keep going and give yourself more credit than you are [giving yourself].



Because of the introspection and self-exploration which are a natural part of counselor training, questioning oneself, one's capabilities, and one's appropriateness for the counseling field was an inherent and common experience for many participants. Nicolai took a retrospective look behind her, remembering the self-doubt and hesitation she had previously known, and compared this to the feelings of confidence and competence which now characterized her view of self.

Alterations in self-perception and one's relationship with self as demonstrated by Chris and Nicolai aside, other participants recounted instances in which said growth went so far as to influence the dynamics of non-counseling or peer-based relationships. Exemplifying this outlook, Ella articulated how her "confidence or ... sense of self" in offering care and support to her older sister in a crisis had increased over the course of her counselor training. Ella went on to remark:

It was almost, it was a little surreal how it happened ... I've never worked in any kind of, like, domestic violence context before, but it was almost like it all, it was all very intuitive how it happened and I would largely attribute a lot of that to, like, the sense of self and intuition that I've gained in this program. I remember talking to my mom and she's like, "I don't know. I don't understand how, like, you know how to do this." And I'm like, "I don't know either. I'm just trusting my gut."

Although the topic under discussion was not familiar to Ella, she reported feeling assured that she would be able to appropriately respond to her sister's situation. Furthermore, Ella's statement identified ways by which this growth in confidence and self-trust impacted both her relationship with her sister and mother. In this way, Ella felt better equipped to provide understanding and encouragement during times of need within her family unit.

To continue, this sense of pursuing an intuitive direction is reinforced by Lyndsey's comments around inter-peer relationships. As the degrees of confidence and self-efficacy harbored by Lyndsey grew through her counselor training, she expressed a willingness to engage in greater self-trust and thereby felt moved to demonstrate greater authenticity:

I would just tell myself like, "be yourself," when I was meeting new students in the program. I was, like, nervous and wanting to, like, seem like a counseling persona or seem like I had it all together. But the friends I've made even towards the beginning and middle of the program, I've just made them for being [myself and] when I show them my authentic self and say like, "It's okay to be goofy, it's okay to make jokes."

While feeling pressured to present as polished and professional was part of Lyndsey's original experience as a CIT, going through the program augmented Lyndsey's interest in and willingness to show more intimate parts of herself to her peers. In this way, Lyndsey's increased feelings of self-assuredness and self-worth allowed her to connect more sincerely with other counselors-in-training.

To conclude, as participants advanced through their training program, many found they believed more assuredly in themselves and their capacities in both counseling and non-counseling relationships. CITs were able to self-prioritize in this way, focusing on strengths and utilizing self-empowerment to help propel their development process. Many participants were able to apply this increased self-efficacy and confidence to their relationships, affording them and their important others a connection centered on greater authenticity. These CITs were ultimately able to remain resilient in the face of challenging dynamics and overcome pushback and uncertainty around this component of self-prioritization.

**Self-Advocacy and Boundary Setting.** Inextricably related to discussions around evolving confidence and competence, participants went on to describe self-prioritization enhancement through their tendency toward and capacity for self-advocacy. These CITs felt said learning experience more actively prepared them to vocalize needs and stand resolutely behind their values and beliefs. This interest in and increased comfort with self-advocacy, in turn, supported many participants in their efforts toward the establishment and maintenance of healthier boundaries for themselves, as well as greater respect for and adherence to those boundaries set by others. This task required that CITs demonstrate resilience throughout the trial-and-error experience of self-advocating for such relational parameters, as well as to overcome potential resistance and ruptures in connection with important others.

Committing herself to the stance that her voice was valuable and she deserved to be heard, Ella articulated the amendment of relationship dynamics with important others from a place of self-advocacy. In instances in which she felt “resentful” as a result of mistreatment or recognized relational imbalances, Ella elected to move toward correcting or healing the dynamic through clear communication, stating: “I’ve had those conversations ... and I’ve been pretty direct about it, and they’ve understood and been able to [change] that.”

That said, such a degree of self-advocacy is not necessarily intrinsic or obvious. Nicolai related the experience of self-discovery and interpersonal analysis requisite to bring her to a place in which she felt comfortable with protecting, promoting, and defending herself in her relationships with important others:

I’ve also thought about the growth that I will continue to do into new relationships, but I’ve 100% looked back on old relationships and ... I can see where I’ve come from into the person I am now and how those changes have been made. And I think the biggest

thing about it is knowing who I am and what my needs are and being able to advocate for those, [that's] one of the biggest things I've seen ... come over time since those old relationships.

Through Nicolai's experience of self-growth as a CIT, she acquired the tools to not only identify personal needs, but the skills required to self-prioritize and demand said needs were being met in her connections with important others. Similarly, this determination toward self-advocation was represented in Elise's narrative as she engaged with potential romantic partners. Here, Elise delineated her selection process, having decided to self-advocate and articulate her own needs, encouraging potential partner candidates to do the same in return:

When I started dating after some time had passed after my divorce ... I would send the guys ... little screening tests. So, I was like, "Let me know what you get on this test." And it was an attachment style quiz. And I was like, okay, those are the ones to steer away from ... I know that this dynamic is not going to work out. "What's your, what are your love languages? Like, how do you, what are your needs and expectations and boundaries?" I remember I got to a point where I made a whole list of, like, if I'm going to settle on a partner, they have to meet all of these qualifications. And if they don't, I'm not interested. My non-therapeutical friends [said] ... "That's, it's a pretty demanding list." I was like, "Yeah, well, you know, I would rather that. This is what I have time and energy for," you know? It really changed, versus before I was just like, "Yeah, anybody that loves me, come on in my life." I'm much more selective.

Interestingly, Elise explained not only the way by which she chose to stand up for and remain firm around her needs with a potential romantic partner, she was also challenged to utilize her campaign toward greater self-advocacy on the subject with her "non-therapeutical friends" who

found her conditions and expectations somewhat extreme. In this way, Elise's endeavors to overcome and insist her needs were going to be met impacted what relationships she elected to enter into, as well as the culture of her existing connections with important others.

One of the most common illustrations of self-advocacy in practice was, for many CITs, the establishment and maintenance of healthy relational boundaries. Creating and sustaining "rules of engagement" for one's connections with important others supported many participants toward self-prioritization, ensuring they felt safer, more understood, and more respected interpersonally. The process of forming and maintaining personal boundaries appeared to also positively impact participants' perceptions of, and their interest in protecting, the established boundaries of others. In explaining his experience as a CIT being solicited for empathic support in non-counseling relationships, Chris articulated the need to firmly communicate the parameters of his "empathy battery" as employed in interpersonal dynamics with important others.

You're trying to put up boundaries because ... there's only so much you can give to people, especially in terms of, like, your personal relationships. So, when they start to feel like you need to do something for them, or you need to listen or whatever, you're kind of like, "I do that all the time." So, it's then [about] putting up those boundaries. Because of the skillset acquired through counselor training, Chris recognized the necessity in establishing precedent for dealing with inappropriate and/or mentally fatiguing utilization of said acquisitions. Chris identified feelings which, when elicited, would indicate to him that self-advocacy through boundary-setting was required. Toward this same end, in speaking directly to her evolving relationship with her older sister, Nicolai described the historic dynamic of her being "passive" and her sister demonstrating greater assertiveness. Nicolai's development though

counselor training, however, supported her in learning how to set appropriate boundaries and what said parameters offered her:

Now I feel more comfortable being able to put boundaries up in our relationship and saying things to her and maybe taking things that she says to me with, like, a grain of salt in some ways. And I think boundary setting has been huge in the program ... I've developed over time, and also a sense of self, like, not feeling as much doubt in case criticism comes my way.

Despite her willingness to communicate and respect others' opinions without feeling defined by them, Nicolai also relayed the necessity in being able to determine when a relationship is no longer viable, executing said cessation, and having self-acceptance around the enforcement of such boundaries:

I've also acknowledged [for] a long, long time of my life that if people aren't ready to change them[selves], they're not going to change when I want them to. So, I've always had a level of acceptance when people decide that it's not the time to be connecting with me. And so especially now after the program, when people maybe aren't changing and aren't willing to make that growth, then I've been willing to say, "Okay, well I'm not gonna spend an overabundance of energy ... and that's okay." And then move on to something else.

Here Nicolai expressed how the creation of boundaries was not always the solution when seeking greater relationship health; in some instances, interpersonal connections must be culled. For Nicolai, healthy boundaries which result in relationship cessation were necessary for the wellness of all individuals participating in an interpersonal dynamic.

To continue, Lyndsey reflected on the positive aspects and outcomes of having boundaries in place, describing how this means of self-advocacy supports self-care and empowerment in her relationships with important others:

I think, through the friends I have now, I developed more of a boundary of when is it time that I need to focus on myself and when is it time [for], and how can I give to, others?

And I think that's something that goes into, you know, my, who I am as a counselor.

Before I would, like, not think of myself first and just help anyone who needed help. And

now, like, something I really value in my current [partner] relationship is we won't

immediately text each other and say like, "Hey, I need help." Or immediately text each

other and say, "Hey, do you have space to listen?" [I] value that my personal

relationships [have] helped me, like, fill up my cup before filling up others, which in turn

helps my counseling relationships because I have to have a full cup, you know?

Instead of boundaries serving as a deterrent or barrier between Lyndsey and her important others, their role appeared to strengthen and promote greater closeness. By advocating for her own needs and establishing agreed-upon parameters in her relationships, Lyndsey saw wellness advantages for not only herself and those she connected with personally, she also saw important and necessary professional health benefits.

In closing, as participants progressed in counselor training, skills around and an impetus to begin applying self-prioritization in asserting their needs within relationships grew. This process included the establishment of self-efficacy and confidence as CITs began applying burgeoning skills and behaviors and observing positive outcomes within close relationships. With such self-belief being reinforced interpersonally, participants went on to describe finding greater comfort in setting healthy boundaries in their connections with important others,

promoting the expression of and amenable response to relational needs. Over time, participants demonstrated the ability to overcome hesitance and self-doubt in relation to self-advocacy and boundary setting, understanding their establishment and maintenance to be a path to greater relationship and personal health.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, CITs found it helpful to reflect on the aspects of their learning and growing experiences which felt overwhelmingly positive, helpful, and inspiring. To begin, several participants demonstrated Overcoming and Resilience through their experience of relational ruptures followed by compensatory attempts at repair, a cycle thought to be a consequence of development in counselor training. Shifts in interpersonal connections frequently occurred as CITs moved through their programming, at times creating a temporary phase of disconnect and awkwardness. These challenges, however, were not perceived by reporting participants to be barriers. Instead, these CITs were able to view ruptures as expectable and acceptable events with the potential for repair. In this way, participants found the cycle of entering into brief disequilibrium in the process of establishing a new equilibrium served to restabilize their relationships with important others. Furthermore, many CITs exemplified Overcoming and Resilience in their gleaning of outright benefits from the learning process. These participants remarked on the increased awareness they had gained from programming and how this enhanced understanding in interpersonal connection. Others described with positivity the degree to which intentional efforts toward encouragement and support within close relationships assisted them in navigating programming. A further selection of CITs remarked on the outright benefit of their development through counselor training strengthening connections with important others. Finally, for most participants the process of Overcoming and Resilience was characterized by the



process of self-prioritization. As CITs moved through the process of programming for many identity development occurred and a sense of self was enhanced, supporting heightened self-efficacy and confidence in interpersonal connections. Another collection of participants articulated the process of putting themselves first through the lens of self-advocacy and boundary setting, characterizing these perspectives and behaviors as a further demonstration of Overcoming and Resilience in their relationships with important others.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

Chapter IV took a deep dive into the experiences of participants as they navigated counselor training and the impact said programming had on their interpersonal relationships with important others. In this chapter, the information conveyed by participants was discussed in relation to counseling literature and the field of Counselor Education and Supervision. Following this, the researcher's reflections, implications for counselor education, limitations of this study, and directions for future research as revealed by this study were presented. Because best practice for interpretative phenomenological analysis studies state "analysis should be interpretive not just descriptive" (Smith, 2011, p. 24), this discussion explored the findings of this study through the interpretative lens of the researcher, allowing for a deeper and more expansive perspective of the participants' reported experiences of counselor training.

Additionally, as described in Chapter III, due to findings of the unpublished pilot study (Ward & Hamilton, 2018), the researcher had anticipated a process of relationship pruning which would arise in coordination with expressed participant needs. The theory of pruning justified the inclusion of the theoretical lens of reciprocal exchange found within social exchange theory, thought to be an effectively illustrative means of viewing related findings. Although pruning was observed in a few participants' narratives as illustrated by the topic of Reciprocity and Mutuality, during the course of this study the concept of pruning as originally defined was revealed to be too narrow to capture the multifaceted and complex nature of the participant experience.

Therefore, a discussion around pruning and reciprocal exchange was limited to appropriate topics in which the theory might provide a greater understanding of the participant experience.

The research question for this study was: How does counselor education training impact/influence the interpersonal relationships of counselors-in-training? The intent of this study was to add to the body of literature regarding the experiences of interpersonal change for counselors-in-training, with multiple objectives. First, with greater knowledge around potential relational dynamism, counseling students could be better prepared for possible shifts in their interpersonal connections with important others throughout programming duration. Second, with more information around the counselor-in-training experience faculty could provide appropriate support and preparation for said students. Finally, counselor education programs could design programs to mitigate challenges CITs may encounter related to changes in interpersonal dynamics students could face as they work through counselor identity development.

### **Interpretations of Findings in Relation to Research Question**

#### **Theme One: Confusion and Insecurity; “Who Am I and Am I Ok?”**

Upon the initiation of counselor training, participants garnered vast amounts of counseling knowledge and received instruction regarding what behaviors were expected of competent counselors. This abrupt absorption of information often led to struggles around the integration of CITs’ understanding and actions with their personal identity. This process was characterized by indecision and confusion within the interactions participants carried out with friends, family, and partners, with CITs finding it difficult to distinguish between their personal and counseling selves. Participants described a course of exploration in which they attempted to make sense of newly acquired information, often demonstrated to include the application of

counseling knowledge and skills within interpersonal interactions. Over time, CITs experienced a strengthening of professional identity illustrated by the advancement of their professional and personal identity integration. During the course of training, many participants additionally described becoming more concerned about the mental health status of both them and their important others. Furthermore, through the counseling training process, most participants acknowledged a need for external validation from faculty, friends, and relatives to reaffirm the CITs' ability to develop as a competent counselor.

### ***Professional and Personal Identity Integration***

To begin, the superordinate theme of confusion and insecurity was most immediately obvious as participants reported navigating personal and professional identity integration throughout the duration of counselor training. Within this integration process, narratives appeared to align with three separate phases: exploration, experimentation, and solidification. The stage of exploration was reflected in Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) stages of counselor development, indicating how students often enter counselor training in the lay-helper phase and as such have a history of supporting distressed important others by offering advice and solutions which they have found personally effective. This phase was characterized by poor boundaries, a predominance of sympathy, strong personal identification, and over-involvement. Upon engaging in counselor training, students were often uncertain as to what counseling is comprised of beyond what they had provided others previously in the lay-helper role. This was illustrated by Elise who stated she knew she wanted to “help people,” “do therapy,” and “be so smart and know all the right things to say” when she commenced counselor training. However, it was not until advancing further into her coursework that Elise recognized counseling as “a real profession” and not “just talking to people.” This realization led to a complete change in how she

“viewed human interaction” altering her perception on “everything in life.” This shifting of worldview was indicative of student change prompted by counseling training as noted by counseling literature (Coll et al., 2013; Furr & Carroll, 2003; McAuliffe, 2002; Naslund, 2015; O’Leary et al., 1994; Schwab & Harris, 1981). More specifically it spoke to the development of increased cognitive complexity (Fong et al., 1997; Foster & McAdams, 1998; Granello, 2000, 2002, 2010) and open-mindedness (Martinez & Dong, 2020; Sue et al., 1992), both observed to be outcomes of counselor training.

This perspective shift as described by Elise denoted a key component of the exploration phase: the transition from lay-helper to beginning student, a phase of counselor identity development Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) suggested may feel overwhelming due to the acquisition of new knowledge and its subsequent application to relationships, experiences of self, and academic/clinical environs. The beginning student phase was characterized by movement from a familiar way of being into the uncharted territory of a progressing counselor identity, a transition marked by confusion and a lack of direction around the integration of new knowledge. This progressive stage was captured by Elise when she stated:

You’re having all this knowledge dumped on you with no direction. And so that’s when I think a lot of students start struggling because it’s, like, we’re all diagnosing our family members, or we’re all, like, recognizing these patterns in ourselves. And we’re just freaking out, like, my whole life feels like I did not know any of this about myself or my family or my ... patterns.

This study recognized the phase of beginning student as a time of exploration in which participants sought to make sense of their counseling training and integrate counseling knowledge, values, and behaviors into their personal lives and relationships. Summarized by

Elise in which she noted the difficulty in learning “intense interpersonal skills” and not incorporate such skills into the students’ interpersonal life “because it does, it does change you.” Further Elise provided specifics indicating “it changes the way you communicate ... with people, even the [way] we listen to people.” Elise encompassed the result of training as personal change which extends to interpersonal change.

Similarly, when Ella was asked to explore the integration of her personal and professional identities over the course of training, she stated how these components of self “kind of slowly changed,” lending support to the idea of personal change being an outcome of counselor training. The evolving nature of identity acknowledged by Ella and Elise is reflected by counseling literature which espoused how “training to be a counselor is more than developing academically and professionally, counselors-in-training must also grow and develop personally” (Naslund, 2015, p. 1).

In an effort to navigate the confusion and insecurity intrinsic to integrating personal and professional identities, as well as to master skills, participants narratives went on to articulate challenges related to the process of experimentation within interpersonal relationships, revealed to be the application in non-counseling settings of knowledge and counseling techniques learned in training. Research demonstrated how students early in their training experience often experiment with their new role as a counselor with friends and family as a means of furthering their counselor identity development (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1995; Sori et al., 1996). However, limited research existed around practicing clinicians’ application of counseling-related techniques and interventions in non-counseling settings (McLeod, 2022), leaving the impact of such difficult to delineate. One appeal of experimenting with skill application and counseling knowledge in non-counseling settings (i.e., with friends and/or family members) appeared to be

the lack of instructor oversight and peer accountability, promoting a sense of safety for participants. Jackie explained a desire “to practice on someone in a way that wasn’t intimidating or really scary or threatening.” Jackie felt more comfortable applying newly acquired skills in a setting without scrutiny and within a relationship that felt “less threatening than a practicum.”

Furthering the conversation, Elise credited this tendency toward experimentation on a lack of direction from counseling program leadership, articulating how little direction she and her peers were provided in terms of appropriate application of attained skills. In this way, determining which pieces of newly acquired knowledge were safe to utilize in personal settings and which were strictly reserved for professional counseling situations felt blurred for many CITs. Applying knowledge and practicing counseling skills even led to explicit conflict between Elise and her close friend, with this individual eventually articulating the experience of being analyzed by Elise as unpleasant and undesirable. For this reason, Elise and this important other ultimately developed a “safe word” so that Elise may be alerted and move back toward her role as friend and away from that of counselor. Elise explained, in part, her behavior seemed out of her control and was something she had to learn to “to turn it off” with time and practice.

In contrast, Ella found that practicing counseling skills in interactions with her family members felt largely beneficial, serving to support the mental health of important others in her life while simultaneously enhancing the closeness Ella felt to her loved ones. Recognizing further advantage to the application of recently acquired counseling knowledge to personal relationships, Lyndsey found she was more adept at identifying and then reflecting the feelings she heard important others articulate to her in discussion. Because this led the individuals she related to feeling heard and affirmed, Lyndsey found value in experimenting in this way within non-counseling relationships. Furthermore, several narratives identified how the reactions of

important others were perceived by some participants to reinforce their sense of burgeoning expertise, increasing the sense of closeness, and understanding of those involved. Some important others felt a greater sense of comfort in approaching or being approached by their CIT friend or family member as compared to a mental health professional external to their relational circles. In this way, non-counseling setting experimentation was thought for some participants to promote the confidence of counselors-in-training confidence, the welfare of important others, and the strength of their relationships.

Expressing the above demonstrated conflict, Skovholt and Rønnestad (1995) indicated how experimentation “can add a positive dimension to the person’s interpersonal relationships; at other times the boundary between roles is inappropriately crossed” (p. 26). Although the existing literature was not clear upon the full ramifications of employing counseling skills and knowledge within interpersonal relationships, it remained apparent that students were interested in and eager to experiment in this manner. This behavior may be explained by the transition out of *the lay-helper* phase, a developmental stage Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) characterized as bereft of appropriate boundaries, to that of beginning student. The evolving nature of counselor development acknowledged, interpersonal complications could justifiably arise from this practice as illustrated by the featured narratives. The incorporation of counseling skills, knowledge, and behavior was an expected and understandable aspect of counselor identity development which facilitated the integration of the professional and personal identities and according to counseling literature was integral to the establishment of counselor competency (Wilkins, 1997). However, many participant narratives appeared to contain the sub-text of acquired counseling knowledge being a kind of *superpower*. In this way, the information and expertise CITs were gaining through their programming seemed to provide many participants with what felt like a special



(even secret) skillset, one which could be ostensibly wielded to the benefit of all others. Because many approaches, techniques, and perspectives inherent to counselor training may be lesser known among the general public, a sense of esotericism permeated many participants' experiences and perhaps encouraged such experimentation in non-counseling settings.

Furthering this theory, within the counselor training context there existed parameters and restraints which may be perceived as limiting student application of counseling material, including maintaining appropriate boundaries, recognition and satisfaction of specific roles, and fundamental adherence to ethical standards. Most participants recognized the existence of such rules and expectations. Despite this understanding, however, many CITs demonstrated through their narrative a willingness and an eagerness, whether conscious or unconscious, to apply newly acquired skills independent of their counseling program. In interpersonal relationships participants reported finding lower-risk environments to manifest their counselor personas because those they were practicing on were typically untrained in, and therefore ignorant of, counseling theory and technique. In this way, some participants felt they could freely apply their body of knowledge to non-counseling settings, and in doing so (a) supported the mental health of an important other, (b) honed their professional expertise, and (c) experienced a sense of satisfaction or even superiority due to their perceived proficiency in this context. Participant narratives described a sensation of "security" and nonjudgment when experimenting with counselor skills and techniques among important others, as well as an expectation that because one's recipient was not likely versed in counselor knowledge the counselor-in-training would also not likely endure pushback, criticism, or rejection in their attempts to apply therapeutic approaches. Such willingness and inclination toward experimentation could catalyze considerable ethical concerns within the framework of counselor training, as students appeared

to be eagerly and knowingly employing skills and knowledge outside of the classroom in early phases of their own counselor development. The American Counseling Association (2014) Code of Ethics prohibited “engaging in counseling relationships with friends or family members with whom [one has] an inability to remain objective” (p. 5), raising the question of whether CITs had likely reached a professional development stage in which they were able to honestly assess their own capacity for said objectivity. While seeking explicit consent within a personal relationship to practice counseling skills in a structured, formulaic role play scenario could offer some safety and acceptability for all parties, this study did not find such parameters preliminarily established or boundaries in place among participants. Such circumstances had the potential to create dangerous dynamics in the relationships CITs maintained with important others.

In terms of programmatic suggestions, it would be helpful to return to Elise, who noted insufficient “direction” following the acquisition of counseling knowledge leading to her and her peers “freaking out.” Here, increased guidance for students as they begin their journey through the counselor identity development process could prove fruitful. Despite the eagerness of CITs to move beyond the pitfalls, awkwardness, and inexperience of the initial stages of development and into a place of stability, security, and competence, counseling instructors must emphasize the necessity and value of discomfort, patience, and mistake-making. Educational environments which embody a culture of perfection may create cohorts of professionals who felt too intimidated to attempt certain skills within a boundary-laden academic setting where they would receive requisite feedback and supervision, thereby unconsciously motivating students to instead utilize non-counseling environments for the encouragement and validation new learners frequently seek. Promoting education pertaining to the potential for negative impact and fallout within interpersonal relationships could also support the skill acquisition of counselors-in-

training, as well as the health of their connections with important others. Most narratives reflecting such experimentation were clear in they involved themselves in the mental health of those they were close to with the intention of rendering aid; participants were not hoping or expecting to cause harm. However, because CITs are new to their field and their mandate, it could be difficult for students to foresee potential adverse effects of practicing newly acquired skills or applying, as yet, inchoate counseling knowledge. An honest conversation around intention and motivation supported by counseling instructors could serve to support CITs to recognize their tendency toward experimentation being likely born of students enduring the imposter syndrome, destabilizing identity transformation, and professional insecurity. Although CITs aspire to bolster the mental health of important others, their exercising of skills and techniques in non-counseling settings was about them, it was not about the recipient.

Following a period of exploration that included experimenting with important others, participants' experience of the confusion and insecurity cycle led to a solidification of identity resulting from professional development as a counselor and the overall integration of their professional and personal selves. Despite the connotation inherent in the title of this phase, solidification was not indicative of completion or the achievement of some terminable identity development, as professional development has been considered a life-long process that "involves an increasing higher order integration of the professional self and the personal self" (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003, p. 27). Instead, this component of personal/professional identity integration was marked by inquiry, insecurity, and flux; like refrigerated Jell-O: extremely fragile, but taking shape. This transition appeared to align with the notion of participants evolving from the beginning student phase to that of advanced student. According to Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003), the advanced student stage was a time of self-doubt and anxiety due to learning a new

way of being and understanding which is congruent with the counseling profession.

Solidification of identity was advanced significantly by official counseling experiences with clients. Lyndsey identified her work with her first client in practicum as a “a huge milestone” in supporting her efficacy as a functioning counselor, helping her recognize she was “actually capable of, like, doing the thing.” Prior to and throughout these early therapeutic relationships, Lyndsey continued to question her own capacity as a potential counselor. Similarly, Chris described his counseling work within his internship as an “eye-opener” in that he was officially fulfilling his role as counselor, previously only a hypothetical future achievement. Literature identified clinical internship placement as a propellant into the advanced student phase of counselor development, a factor demonstrated to be in concert with the current study. For many participants it felt confusing and unbalancing to reach this solidification stage, to move through the hype of pre-client work and into applying their knowledge base and skillset. Self-belief and competence were frequently questioned, reinforced positively when counselors-in-training received positive client or supervisory feedback and resulting in a sense of personal and professional instability when the opposite felt true.

Other elements outside direct contact with clients contributed to the solidification of counselor identity development. Participants described how coursework, assignments, and interactions with faculty, peers, and other counseling professionals together contributed to the stabilizing/destabilizing quality of this stage of personal and professional identity integration. As highlighted by Ella, some narratives attributed counselor identity development to a culmination of many experiences throughout counselor training. Together, these undertakings “slowly, over time built my understanding of, like, what it means to be a counselor and ... what it means for me to be a counselor.” The emphasis here in the solidification phase appeared to be the process.

There was vacillation. Both evolution and devolution felt present to CITs and both appeared to be necessary components of growth progression.

### ***Mental Health and Responsibility***

As students received vast amounts of diverse counseling information and skills through the course of training, they often struggled to integrate acquired counseling knowledge both personally and professionally. Although programming opportunities provided direct counseling experience and allowed students to contextualize and apply their counselor training to the benefit of personal/professional identity integration, confusion and insecurity arose exclusive to these specific transitions. Many narratives presented the sub-theme of counselors-in-training harboring a sense of responsibility for the mental health and wellness of both themselves and important others. In these instances, confusion and insecurity appeared to stem from recently acquired knowledge creating a kind of onus on participants, resulting in many wondering whether having the capacity to support mental health management in non-counseling settings meant one should support said mental health management.

As related to obligations around personal mental health (herein articulated as the sub-topic self), Chris discussed personal expectations around entering graduate school, asserting he needed to “be something new, something different.” This suggested a desire to change, to improve, or perhaps hinted at Chris being concerned about potential inadequacies. His intention toward self-improvement appeared related to his mental health, due to Chris’s disclosure of a mental health diagnosis he was treating sans psychotropics. In his narrative, Chris described how coursework led him to scrutinize himself and his relationships to a new degree, an undertaking which felt confusing and destabilizing. In Chris’s experience, the process of counselor training exacerbated his mental health challenges, a condition he was uncertain how to most effectively

address. He spoke of both his instructors' initial interest in Chris conveying mental health needs, as well as their later unreceptivity. As a result, Chris lost trust in program faculty, felt isolated in managing his mental health independently, and feared his mental health may negatively affect his ability to maintain the standards of a counselor. Furthering the discussion, Elise touched upon how one's responsibility for one's mental health felt like an expectation placed on counselors-in-training by their program. Elise described how the culture of counselor training facilitated an "environment [that] feeds into perfectionism." This aligned with Rønnestad and Skovholt's (2003) assessment of the beginning student in which "students ask themselves if they have the personal characteristics needed for this kind of work, the resourcefulness needed to complete the studies and the ability to bridge the felt chasm between theory and practice" (p. 12). Within an environment characterized by rigor and high standards, all the while moving through the beginning student phase, Chris was conflicted by his inability to "fix" himself despite knowledge of and training in the mental health field. In this way, Chris's self-belief, and his confidence he would develop into a "good counselor" were diminished.

Despite an expressed sense of responsibility to help or cure one's own mental health issues, confusion and insecurity was also demonstrated in participants feeling obligated to address psychological concerns and needs as seen in or articulated by important others. Again, an impetus to act, a sense of "if I *can* do, I *should* do," was markedly present for counselors-in-training. Jackie exemplified this in her sense of obligation toward supporting the mental health of her longtime friend to "make it better for him." John felt comparable compelled to apply recently acquired skills through supporting his wife's mental health needs, an intervention which John felt was ineffective. Much like Chris, John felt an intense onus to utilize the knowledge and skills he had gained but the realization that this was not an obvious or simple solution appeared to

negatively impact John's sense of capacity and competency as a counselor. Feeling both responsible for the wellbeing of this important other and unable to provide satisfactory support caused John to question his burgeoning professional identity: "If I can't help my wife, how can [I] help someone else?"

Confronted by the acquisition of counseling related knowledge, participants strove to make sense of their responsibility for the mental health of themselves and others. This confusion impeded counselor identity integration for many participants, contributing to ethically questionable interactions as participants at times sought to treat the mental health needs of important others. CITs cited a lack of programmatic clarity as a primary reason they felt said onus. Working through stages of counselor development, participants often felt as though their personal and professional identities were in question when faced with such intense presumptions of responsibility for self and others. If they can, then they should. Right? The confusion and insecurity this experience generated makes apparent how the support of program faculty could provide CITs with the effective, beneficial structure and clarity they may need to best understand their roles within personal, academic, and professional settings. Having such qualified, respected authorities on counseling encourage students to seek support external to themselves could serve to relieve CITs of this sense of responsibility while simultaneously improving mental health outcomes for students themselves, as well as the people they care about. Program instructors could confidently assure students that just because they can provide a service or a perspective, this does not necessarily mean they should. In fact, it would typically be in everyone's best interest that they recuse themselves from the counselor role in these instances and invite an external mental health professional into the dynamic.

### *Reassurance*

Although harboring a sense of responsibility for the psychological wellness of self and others certainly betrayed feelings of confusion and insecurity, a further sub-theme was discovered among participant narratives. Many participants addressed the complications related to identity integration and feeling duty-bound to counsel wherever/whenever/whoever through actively seeking reassurance from counseling peers, family members, supervisors, and faculty. In this way, CITs described the process of actively seeking out affirmation and validation from individuals whose opinions held weight to the students themselves. For example, Lyndsey relied on her friend, who was further advanced in the counseling program, to ease her anxiety when a client no-showed, an event which initially caused Lyndsey to question her own competency and whether said client would return to services. Nicolai sought similar reassurance and validation from her sister when she felt “overwhelmed” by counselor training. For Elise, she looked to her practicum supervisor to validate her experience of working with a challenging client, with this individually assuring Elise that she was allowed to be human and that, “you don’t have to be Mother Teresa about the way you feel about people.”

Because validation was an important factor for CITs throughout counselor training, participants stated the potential helpfulness of faculty providing “more reassurance,” supporting students as they transition through the mire of imposter syndrome and its related fallout. As demonstrated, reassurance provided participants security around their possessing the requisite characteristics of a future counselor while enhancing confidence in ability and competence. This conformed to aspects of the previously mentioned advanced student phase of counselor development in which CITs experienced an enhancement in efficacy in their clinical role but



remained decidedly dependent on supervisors and peers for positive affirmation (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003).

Ultimately, as counseling students progressed through the stages of counselor development from lay helper and beginning student to that of advanced student, CITs encountered challenges with the process of integrating knowledge and behaviors required of competent counselors. The journey of counselor identity development appeared to prompt confusion and insecurity for study participants. Participants initially entered a stage of self-exploration which involved the application of counseling theory as they reconceptualized themselves and others. Participants often struggled to find balance and establish comfort in their new perceptions of self, others, relationships, and the world at large. In an effort to internalize new knowledge and to master counseling skills, some participants experimented with such inside interpersonal relationships. Following direct counseling experience, many participants' counseling identities increasing solidified, leaving them to swing between a sense of self-assuredness and that of self-doubt. As participants' professional identities strengthened, some questioned their responsibility to support the mental health of themselves and others. Because of such destabilizing experiences, throughout the counseling training process many participants actively sought reassurance from respected others to assuage their confusion and insecurity. These individuals sought confirmation of their appropriateness for the counseling field and their ability to successfully perform a counseling role. It was important to note how the nuanced depiction of participant experience as they progressed through exploration, practice, to solidification illustrated many overlapping elements. These were also inextricably linked to the concept of harboring mental health responsibilities in non-counseling settings and to the seeking of reassurance from those the participants trusted. These sub-theme and sub-topic interactions

and correlations provided valuable information toward better understanding the phenomenon of counselor development. It was apparent from the information gathered in this study that there are inherent risks in counselor training process for students related to relationship with self and others.

### **Theme Two: Growing Pains**

In conjunction with the initial experience of confusion and insecurity within the counselor development paradigm, participants disclosed instances of relational transition endured with important others and characterized by a range of challenges, obstacles, and upsets. As students advance through counselor training they “change” and “grow on the interpersonal and intrapersonal levels” (Furr & Carroll, 2003, p. 483). This study referred to the changes experienced through counselor training as growing pains. These growing pains were described by participants as often unpleasant, uncomfortable, and even painful.

#### ***Relationship Imbalanced and Disequilibrium***

To begin, many participants expressed relationship imbalances and moments of disequilibrium throughout their training which included a desire for greater relational depth and the frustration that this may not be achievable in specific interpersonal dynamics. As participants progressed in their training programs, most recounted how their perspectives shifted around the quality of present and future relationships. Ella illustrated her expectations for connection within potential future relationships through her description of declining to invest time and effort into establishing a friendship with a group of “girls” who were “perfectly nice and perfectly sweet,” but did not appear interested or able to connect with Ella in the deep and meaningful way she now sought. Whereas Ella looked forward, Chris examined the depth of his current relationships, only to find them lacking in intimacy and authenticity. He explained how his “perspective shift”

left Chris dissatisfied with the “superficial” nature of his relationships, when previously he found the same connections sufficient in meeting his interpersonal needs. Chris’s efforts to restructure his existing relationships or establish new “meaningful relationships or even healthy relationships” was met with frustration which he attributed to his inability to successfully integrate the information gained through training regarding improving relational depth and enhancing meaning.

Through the course of training, participant narratives indicated how CITs experienced a “perspective shift,” one resultant from the acquisition of psychological knowledge. According to Murray and Kleist (2011), counselor training led students to become “aware of personal and relational patterns. Their awareness then [becomes] fodder for making personal and relational changes” (p. 125). As CITs explored themselves and their relationships, insight was gained around their interpersonal needs, bringing focus to relationships that could be lacking. For this reason, students could become dissatisfied with perfunctory relationships. Students then sought greater depth from current relationships and assessed for the potential for deeper relational meaning in future relationships, potentially influencing decision making around the pursuit of said relationships. It was unclear what specific element of counselor training motivated students to develop greater relational depth in interpersonal relationships, however it appeared probable the programmatic focus upon authenticity and meaning-making in the counselor-client relationship could have encouraged students to incorporate this element into their own interpersonal connections.

This quest for relational depth contributed to a sense of relationship imbalance and disequilibrium for many CITs, a growing pain which for many felt inextricably related to a desire for greater interpersonal reciprocity and mutuality or otherwise described by this study as

“feeling taken advantage of.” Counselor training enhanced empathic listening and relational support skills for a majority of participants. However, these newly acquired perspectives and abilities resulted in some participants feeling taken advantage of interpersonally by important others. For example, Chris explained his fear of “people” wanting to know or talk with him not because they appreciated Chris for various qualities of his personality but instead because they were “using [him] because [he is] a counselor.” Establishing a boundary with others which clearly delineated his personal from his professional identity and clarified the role Chris was willing to play within relationships, felt to Chris to be a barrier to relationship success. Similarly, Ella explained how her use of counseling skills with extended family members created “a little bit more of a one-way relationship sometimes” in which she felt unseen, unheard, and that her relationships needs were being neglected.

Within both Chris and Ella’s narratives, these CITs described the quite literal relationship imbalance of lacking reciprocity and mutuality. As their counselor identity developed, others sought to make use of their counseling skills without reciprocation. These relationship dynamics could be appropriate for a counselor-client relationship, however, interpersonally participants found their relational needs unmet. Bischoff (1997) supported this finding by describing the role conflict in transitioning from the previously held role of lay helper to that of professional helper in which friends and family sought to share personal problems with CITs, often leading to relationship difficulties. Although students appeared excited to use their skills and their enhanced abilities to provide support to important others, the absence of reciprocity and mutuality left CITs unsatisfied and feeling unduly burdened. The concept of reciprocal exchange contained in social exchange theory stated how received benefits from interactions with others are unknown and there is a risk that reciprocation may not manifest. For this reason, when mutuality was

indeed demonstrated interpersonally trust was built within the relationship, allowing for the strengthening of the connection (Molm, 2010). Within the examples shared by participants, students appeared eager and willing to utilize knowledge and skills toward the wellbeing of important others but when reciprocity did not manifest the connection did not undergo a strengthening or an enhancement of shared trust.

Further, C. M. Miller et al. (2020) characterized counselors' work and personal life as a "reciprocal relationship" in which one influences the other and both positive and negative conditions "spillover" in "bidirectional ways" (p. 385). It would appear probable that given the demands of counselor training, participants felt depleted and thereby challenged to maintain the conditions of reciprocal exchange in which mutuality is not assured. As Elise stated "it sucked emotional energy being with clients ... I couldn't have relationships in my life that were also sucking out energy. I had to have relationships that were, like, refilling my cup." It would seem the intentional, necessary, one-way direction of counselor-client relationship combined with the intensity of programmatic requirements left many participants running on empty. Given the reduction of training demands it is conceivable students could have a higher tolerance for relationships characterized by lower degrees of reciprocity. Further, literature suggested this experience could be transitional in that as students advanced through their counselor identity development, they became more comfortable balancing their newfound professional role and their personal relationships, reducing relational distress (Bischoff, 1997) and supporting CITs to cull higher-maintenance/lower-reciprocity intimacies from their lives.

Closely relevant to the interpersonal instability caused by seeking greater relational depth and reciprocity, nearly all participants described a growing pain characterized by alterations in their relationship expectations and selectivity because of counselor training. These individuals

acknowledged a need to limit less healthy connections and to dedicate greater intentionality to those relationships more proficient at meeting all parties' personal needs. Elise described this shift in relationship expectations by stating "I think you form a criteria in yourself for what relationships are worth working through things and what relationships are the ones that aren't ... And I think once you become a professional [counselor], that list gets smaller." Here Elise expressed her refined "criteria" for acceptable relationships, criteria which was reformulated and narrowed by her educational and clinical experiences. Prior to training she was more accepting of one-sided connections or relationships which felt mentally/emotionally draining, neither of which she now viewed as tenable circumstances. Rather, Ella now prioritized relationships which demonstrated greater balance, met her personal needs, and were "refilling [her] cup."

On a related note, John attributed his increased selectivity in the formation of brand-new friendships to his experience of counselor training. Because of the knowledge and skills acquired throughout the program, John now considered the qualities and values he found necessary for relationship sustainability prior to engaging in said relationship: "I'm trying, trying on new friends and seeing if we can get to that place ... to that place of authenticity." Participants began to assess current and potential relationships based upon more rigorous standards, culling relationships with limited potential for reciprocity/mutuality, relational depth, authenticity, etc. This behavior elicited by counselor training adhered to the anticipated concept of pruning in which students assessed relationships to determine whether the energy invested in maintaining the relationship was worth what was gained (Ward & Hamilton, 2018).

Bischoff (1997) characterized early CITs' clinical experience as stressful and demanding as a result of the investment of mental and emotional energy into clients and professional development. This shift in energy expenditure and prioritization contributed to greater rigidity in

relationships CITs maintain with important others, potentially resulting in personal relationship stress. Graduate programs have been shown to be overwhelming and highly demanding for students and their families and increase the risk of divorce for couples. Further, coursework has been seen to encourage an examination of CIT marriages, contributing to the confrontation of problems and potentially leading to conflict (Sori et al., 1996). Murray and Kleist (2011) determined that training resulted in students developing greater awareness around personal relationships, family-of-origin patterns, and a deeper scrutiny of their romantic relationships. This risk to romantic intimacies is illustrated in Elise's experience whereby the knowledge and skills she acquired through training increased the expectations she had for her marriage. Finding this relationship unable to meet these newly-established standards because of "toxic or unhealthy patterns," Elise and her partner decided to divorce.

According to Bischoff (1997), as students progressed their proficiency in balancing professional roles with personal identity eased interpersonal relationship rigidity, allowing them to incorporate counseling skills during interactions without fear of role conflict. Relationship stress and rigidity with important others could be a temporary condition for CITs, reflective of a transitional period where the consequence of programmatic demands on time, as well as emotional, mental, and relational energy, left few reserves for students to apply to interpersonal relationships. That said, this study indicated a more permanent change in relationship behavior in which students assessed relationships for potential depth and meaningfulness. Additionally, participants appeared to gauge whether relationships would support their personal and professional growth; if relationships did not meet specific criterion, students often would prune these relationships. Within the context of reciprocal exchange, participants appeared open to continuing to contribute to relationships without expectation of reciprocation. However, the deal-

breaker seemed to reside in whether the relationship was causing the participant harm. Nicolai captures this in stating:

I've reflected on my relationships with people. If I've changed in a negative way, for who I know that I am, that tells me that that relationship is actually hurting me ... if I'm changing negatively ... then I need to not let that continue.

This finding was congruent with Murray and Kleist's (2011) study of romantic relationships where students assessed their intimate partner relationships, determining whether they met their needs, values, standards, and expectations. Increased awareness led to students making intrapersonal and interpersonal changes to address said needs and desires. These changes required the process of "challenging rules, challenging roles, sacrificing, communicating, stating needs, and enhancing connection." Naturally destabilizing albeit intended to benefit, students sought to actively change "norms and ways of being" in their romantic relationships (Murray & Kleist, 2011, p. 127). Similarly, participants found the process of increasing relational expectations and selectivity to be healthy but frequently unbalancing.

To continue, throughout the process of personal, professional, and academic growth, participants mentioned a confusing experience of dissatisfaction, explaining how recently-acquired knowledge and skills combined with increased awareness was resulting in them losing "innocence" in their connections with important others. Because this experience of dissatisfaction in previously satisfying intimacies felt counterintuitive, unavoidable, and wholly unexpected, the associated feelings of loss were also perceived to contribute to the growing pain of relational disequilibrium. Nicolai provided a helpful example through her description of her once relatively smooth relationship with her sister becoming "more clunky" following her initiation of counselor training, an evolution within their siblingship which motivated Nicolai



toward greater assertiveness and boundary setting within said intimacy. This behavior aligned with Murray and Kleist's (2011) findings in terms of the process of "challenging rules [and] challenging roles" in relationships because of the level of awareness and understanding catalyzed through counselor training. However, as with so many participant narratives, Nicolai's disclosure added the dimension of regret to this experience, stating:

There was, like, almost a want to go back to old ways and like fall back on old habits rather [than] engaging in the mature way that we've developed over time. ... And it's not, it's not as [much], like, a positive connection as consistently as it used to be.

Here Nicolai yearned for the simple ease of her siblingship prior to the increases in awareness and self-advocacy she underwent during programming. Farber (1983) explained this phenomenon as counselors being unable to resist applying their "special skills and psychological understanding into their homes" a condition termed as "psychological mindedness" (pp. 180-181). He described this condition as a "double-edge sword," one which allowed counselors increased personal/interpersonal insight while simultaneously causing over-analysis of social interactions with the potential to restrict spontaneity and reduce connection (p. 181). It was here that relational dissatisfaction, or an "ignorance is bliss"-type phenomenon occurred.

Elise provided a further illustration of her loss of innocence in describing the shift in her relationship with her mother, explaining how she was unable to "separate" her clinical judgment from her personal perception of this important other. Elise's inability to remove her professional assessment of her mother from her personal history with this individual supported Farber's (1983) assertion that counseling is a "lifestyle" that does not necessarily have an "on-off" switch (p. 181). This psychological mindedness was at times seen to be a burden for participants, limiting the once natural comfort and flow of important relationships and replacing it with an

awkwardness born of heightened awareness and a helplessness in returning to the security of lost naivete. The current study provided a greater understanding of the CIT experience of counselor identity development with the above participants illustrating nuances related to relational change and personal growth. Risks such as the growing pain of eventual relationship dissatisfaction were not apparent at the onset of counselor training. With greater awareness and attention to these hidden hardships, CITs could better prepare themselves to address such challenges. Additionally, the collective normalization of said developmental struggles could encourage students to seek support from peers and instructors when such instances of instability and imbalance arose.

Further interpersonal imbalances reported by nearly half of all participants featured what this study dubbed a relationship dynamic inversion with an important other. Such a shift in relational stratification entailed the participant now holding a role found to be some combination of new and prized or foreign and uncomfortable as a consequence of their movement through counselor training. This growing pain had various manifestations. Nicolai's siblingship with her sister exemplified this point, with Nicolai detailing how she had previously been a "recipient in that relationship" prior to commencing her counseling program. As she progressed as a CIT, the dynamic changed to include "two independent people in a relationship together." This evolution in Nicolai's relationship with her sister illustrated a degree of elevation; where before Nicolai saw her role as more passive and accommodating, as a result of Nicolai's personal growth and development prompted through training both she and her sister were forced to adapt their relational constellation. Albeit an ostensibly positive outcome, the disequilibrium this shift created in the process of seeking out and refining a new equilibrium is palpable.

To continue, Ella provided a more extreme example of dynamic inversion in her relationship with her family, one in which she came to be viewed as an expert on mental health.

This provided Ella “more authority” in these relationships, so much so that her both her mother and sister would “cite [Ella] as a source of things” when asserting a point related to psychological wellbeing. Although literature shed little light on this topic, C. M. Miller et al.’s (2020) study of counselor training impact on the romantic partners of counselors noted how participants felt their perspectives were undervalued by friends and family in light of the CIT’s expertise. This suggests that counseling training could contribute to heightened esteem of the CIT within interpersonal connections, altering long-held relational patterns.

Further evidence of relations dynamic inversion was seen in Chris’s relationship with his long-time friend who viewed Chris’s academic progress as outpacing his own. Chris shared what he perceived his friend was feeling, paraphrasing from his friend’s point of view: ““Oh, you’re successful now. Like, you’re big time. You’re doing something great with your life while I’m over here fixing upholstery on cars.”” Despite Chris’s expressed feeling of inadequacy in relation to his close friend’s professional skillset, this important other appeared to be experiencing similar, mirrored feelings of inadequacy. The imbalance to the relationship’s original organizational structure felt therefore threatened as a result of Chris’s pursuit of a profession in counseling. This interaction exemplifies the Sori et al. (1996) study which examined the relationships of CITs and their romantic partners, the findings of which explained how the rapid personal growth and development of students may cause partners to “feel threatened or left behind” (p. 266). Further evidence of this phenomenon was found in the Dahl et al. (2010) study of the ways by which CIT relationships changed with their partners, with some partners experiencing a sense of being neglected or abandoned by the CIT’s personal and intellectual growth.

Although relationship dynamic inversion was not a well understood phenomenon, this study offered insight into this aspect of interpersonal relationship change and personal growth which appeared related to counselor training and could influence counselor development. Despite any positive feelings related to confidence and self-esteem which arose for participants when their status within important relationships appeared to be elevated, the shift in dynamics was certainly destabilizing at times and left some participants feeling relationally unmoored.

A final aspect of relationship imbalance and disequilibrium relevant to the growing pains of counselor training and shared by study participants was the experience of emotional fatigue or “always being on.” Several CITs shared anecdotes related to the exhaustion of emotional/psychological demands inherent to counseling training and their clinical work. This depletion of energy was shown invariably to have consequences for the connections participants held with important others. Literature described the counseling occupation and training as stressful and “extremely consuming,” detracting from the time and energy CIT would previously expend toward friends, family, and personal interests (Farber, 1983, p. 181).

According to Farber (1983), counselors were “totally immersed in a ‘psychological’ world,” one in which perspectives were shaped by counseling theory and therapeutic constructs and this specialized lens led to a “lifestyle” that did not necessarily have an “on-off” switch (p. 181). Chris captured this experience in sharing: “I would conceptualize every single person. Like, [I] couldn’t turn it off.” Chris’s narrative highlighted the overlap and interconnection common between the professional and personal lives of CITs, a difficult to differentiate blending of identities in which students experienced “spillover” from one realm to the other (C. M. Miller et al., 2020, p. 385). Participants expressed a desire for an “off switch” that could be flipped when they needed a reprieve from the emotional and mental intensity of clinical work and

counselor training. This desire to “turn off” represented a need to rest, regroup, and preserve energy via deliberate attempts at energy conservation and withdrawal on multiple fronts. Chris further exemplified this experience of overextension and mental strain in describing the exhaustion inherent in constantly needing to feel out and determine when it was necessary to “turn on” and appropriate to “turn off.” Like a cellphone outside the reach of its service area, Chris felt he was constantly “roaming;” enormous battery expenditure was being spent on attempts to pick up a signal. Chris went on to express his concerns around spending time avoiding exhausting counseling skills application (being “turned off”) could result in his not having the interest or the energy stored to turn back “on” when serving clients. Chris explained how the act of toggling between the two “switches” was a skill he was “trying to figure out,” yet had doubts around whether a counselor could confidently “ever can get to that point.”

Expanding upon this experience further, Jackie discussed the consequences of emotional fatigue in relation to a close friendship. Jackie reported on the act of “withdrawing” from said connection with an important other as a direct consequence of feeling “emotionally exhausted” from coursework, clinical work, and/or aspects of her personal life, leaving Jackie depleted and too “drained” to show up for her close friend as reliably as she would have previous to counselor training. Viewed from a reciprocal exchange standpoint, participants continued to demonstrate a desire to provide for others without expectations of reciprocity, yet found programmatic demands on time, energy, and emotional/psychological investment to be a raging torrent flowing outward. This left CITs with little reserve for the maintenance of personal mental, emotional, and relational health.

Counseling literature readily acknowledged the intense demands of counseling training and the burden therefore placed on student interpersonal relationships. However, few suggestions

were made toward the reduction of said demands. The common recommendation within training programs has been for CITs to demonstrate self-advocacy toward their own engagement in regular self-care practices. Participants recognized the benefits and necessity of self-care. That said, encouragement toward self-care ends felt hollow and functionally impossible to many CITs due to the time and energy constraints of training. Elise captured what she found to be the hypocrisy of programmatic advocacy toward self-care through her expression of the following frustrations:

Students come in and we tell them, “You have to [demonstrate] growth, yet you have to have self-care and self-compassion. You have to have these things to be a good counselor, but we’re going to require 300-hours from you in six months.” I’m sorry.

Also, if you have to have a job to, like, provide for your family and then there’s all these papers and things that are due, right? They don’t look at what is a variable and reasonable amount that a human can tolerate. ... We’re not doing scaffolding for students.

Here Elise illustrated her deep attachment to and sense of responsibility for adhering to the behaviors and practices which would contribute to her development as a “good counselor.” Yet in recognizing her own limitations, Elise qualified the expectations of her counselor training program as being beyond feasibility and outside realistic human capacity. The potential harm to student health was apparent within participant narratives, creating an imperative for counseling programs to further support student health and success in addressing the growing pain of emotional fatigue. Elise stressed the need for “scaffolding” the student experience of counselor training. This study espoused the benefits of directly and clearly articulating details of the counselor development process which include probable personal and relational challenges. By normalizing and discussing these challenges with candor and vulnerability, counseling programs

could provide such a framework for additional support and guidance. Further, participant responses justified the inclusion of the topic of emotional fatigue in counselor training. When asked what faculty could do to support student growth personally and help CITs weather relational turmoil and change throughout counselor programming, Jackie expressed how instructors solely focused on self-care acted to the detriment of students' personal mental and relational health:

[Self-care.] That's all that they really talked about, not how you ... becoming a counselor affects your relationships. Just the time commitment of school affecting your relationships. It could be brought up ... [in] a second ethics class when you're talking about dual relationships and boundaries and stuff like that ... cause every flipping class talks about self-care. So, you could always throw it in that conversation of, like, prioritizing your own mental health above others.

This study highlighted the burden of emotional fatigue and the possible consequences of carrying said burden. Although, such fatigue could prove unavoidable within counselor training, the implications for relationship/mental/emotional/physical health, counselor identity development, and successful program completion demand that programs seek to provide additional scaffolding to address this issue.

The process of counselor training contributed to CITs enduring growing pains, wherein many participants encountered relationship imbalances and disequilibrium which arose from personal change generating interpersonal change for CITs. As participants advanced in their programming, many desired greater relational depth with important others and developed heightened awareness around reciprocity and mutuality in relationships. Further, participants augmented their relationship expectations and selectivity to include boundaries toward the

maintenance of personal and relationship health. This need to protect personal and interpersonal wellness often led to increased discernment and care in forming new relationships and/or continuing old relationships which were deemed less likely to meet CIT expressed needs. Contained within the aforementioned growing pains, some participants also reported dissatisfaction with accentuated counseling knowledge and growing personal/interpersonal awareness, perceiving this evolution as a loss of innocence. Additional experiences during this transitional phase involved relationship dynamic inversion within interpersonal connections and emotional fatigue due to the rigors and demands counselor training.

### ***Loneliness***

Beyond the relational imbalances and disequilibrium gleaned from participant narratives, an additional manifestation of growing pains found to be common among CITs was related to a clear and debilitating sense of detachment from others which participants credited to on-going counselor development. As participants experienced shifts towards a counselor perspective, they often simultaneously felt distanced from important others due to their new way of being and understanding. This experience of isolation was confusing for many CITs, many of whom were left feeling they must conceptualize and carry the burdens of counselor training without the support and care of those closest to them. Further, some participants experienced a sense of loneliness even in the company of their counseling peers. Despite obvious commonalities these CITs likely shared with members of their cohorts, participant narratives described the experience of being “alone together,” surrounded by similarly situated students and yet alienated from those they would perceivably be able to most readily relate to. A third expression of loneliness was articulated by CITs as a diminished connection with important others, typified by the breakdown or detachment of previously strong, solid relationships.



As would be expected, participants' experience of loneliness varied. Elise disclosed a sense of isolation related to a feeling of esotericism. Her experience of disconnection in personal relationships felt due to Elise's progression through counselor training, an experience which had provided her with skills and insights little-known to those individuals she was in close relationships with. Elise expressed how her disconnection from her mother, who suffered poor mental health, felt due to her new psychological awareness, yet felt both ethically barred and personally powerless to address her mother's needs. Elise's discomfort and sense of isolation was apparent through her statement: "I have to keep acting like I'm ignorant. Like I don't see these things that are happening. And I felt very lonely in that." In an effort to ease the pain and confusion inherent in this situation, Elise began to avoid her mother, reinforcing the isolation esotericism had catalyzed.

Similarly, Chris endured distance in relationships through establishing boundaries with others as a means of self-protection and to not over-deplete his "empathy battery," leaving him feeling isolated. Chris's establishment of self-protective boundaries increased his sense of loneliness as his counselor identity developed, describing how even the healthiest boundaries can lead to the shrinking of the "group or square of people that you used to get along with." Ella revealed how her sense of isolation was derived from her establishment of increased relational standards and augmented selectivity in romantic intimacies, changes in her perceptions of self and others she credited to counselor training. Whereas in the past Ella may have had a higher tolerance for partnerships which did not fully meet her relationship needs out of an aversion to isolation, following counselor training prioritized relationship compatibility, recognizing the potential and actual loneliness this permitted. Ella's increased relational standards, albeit toward

the benefit of her personal and relational wellness, contributed to greater isolation due to an unwillingness to compromise.

Isolation as a byproduct of counselor training was not represented in counseling literature. Research outside the field of counselor training which discusses isolation and loneliness established a correlation between the two concepts while noting the terms as distinct. *Social isolation* was viewed as “an objective lack of interactions with others or the wider community,” while loneliness was “the subjective feeling of the absence of a social network or a companion” (Leigh-Hunt et al., 2017, p. 158). Although social isolation was seen as an objective experience compared to loneliness as a subjective experience, the interrelatedness is clear. Both constructs have been associated with poor physical and mental health outcomes. Participant reports of isolation (organized for the purposes of this study as a subtopic beneath the subtheme of Loneliness) indicated that aspects of counselor training could accentuate such experiences of detachment.

Another aspect of the growing pain of loneliness arose through participant narratives in terms of feeling alone together. This subtopic entailed how CITs felt “othered” by peers within shared counselor programming. Although participants were in the company of members of their cohorts and endured similar hardships and successes, there remained a sense of detachment which contributed to an inability to connect authentically. Fomenting frustration and resignation among many CITs, the fact that participants felt unable to adequately connect with the very people who could ostensibly best understand their experience made this manifestation of loneliness all the more acute and painful.

Modeling this quandary, both Ella and Jackie credited program elements as a source of loneliness as felt between themselves and their peers. For Ella the challenge was in relation to

the restrictions imposed by COVID-19, with remote learning making it more difficult to connect and engage with members of her cohort. Jackie, on the other hand, articulated disappointment in having attended a satellite campus where she felt ignored and undervalued. The issue of feeling alone together is further evident in Chris's narrative, crediting this inter-peer disconnect on the culture and coursework of his counseling program. Chris described how he and his fellow students were overwhelmed by the counselor development process, an evolution which included a high degree of information integration, self-/other-reflection, and awareness augmentation and reduced the ability of individuals to be as present or authentic.

Chris's narrative brought to mind the image of students attempting to ford a raging river alongside one another, each directing the entirety of their attention and care to the slippery, uneven footing of the riverbed; each with hopes of making the distant shore. Students could leave the original riverbank having established inchoate connections. If not, it could feel quite impossible for students to pause mid-stream to make conversation, organize one another, and build relationships toward for the purpose of joining hands and stabilizing or assisting each other in crossing. Whether students attempted to build preliminary bonds or, with greater difficulty, to connect mid-stream would have depended on individual personalities, coping mechanisms, and any prior river crossing expertise. This variability, however, neglected the apparently large faction of students who ultimately forded the river alone. If connecting on the original shore felt too rushed or inauthentic, and relying on a peer suddenly and severely mid-stream felt intrusive or an admission of weakness, students were then left to their own devices. Bedraggled, soaking, and jaded, those participants who felt "alone together" conceded they were surviving the crossing and making it slowly to the far shore. But looking to the right and left at their similarly

overwhelmed and overexerted peers, these CITs expressed confusion around why they had to face the experience alone.

Disappointments and frustrations related to the experience of moving through counselor programming alone together with peers demonstrated an aspect of loneliness which participants felt was unique to counselor training. This was not the final loneliness-based growing pain shared, however. An additional manifestation of loneliness associated with counselor training reported by a majority of participants focused on an observed diminished connection with an important other. Participants described how relational detachment and decreasing interpersonal engagement contributed to sensations of loneliness and withdrawal. To expound on such experiences, John spoke of missing important milestones in his children's development due to the time he invested in "getting good grades" in his counseling program, something which in hindsight proved less meaningful to John than being present in his young family's life.

Providing further examples, Chris shared anecdotes related to his reduced connection with a friend of "20-plus-years." Due to changes in Chris's perspective on mental health as a consequence of his training, Chris found himself less tolerant of his friend's behavior: "I was just kinda over him." Furthermore, Chris felt a diminished connection to people in general because of his new habit of "overanalyzing them and, like, trying to conceptualize their life." Describing a similar outcome of loneliness but through distinct means, Elise attributed her loss of connection with others as an outcome of the personal growth she undertook during counselor training. Elise found that said growth was not matched by important others, causing a mismatch and asymmetry which resulted in relational distance. Describing this process, Elise noted how "you can't change the person and they're not in the program with you. You grow apart. And there's only so much you can [do] ... that gap is too much."

Participant narratives aligned with the findings of existing counseling literature in that CITs often encountered challenges with connection with important others as a result of counselor training. Reduced connection within interpersonal relationships appeared to arise from many disparate components of programming. Murray and Kleist (2011) noted how students sacrificed their time and their closeness with loved ones due to educational commitments. Additional challenges in connection were attributed to role conflict wherein students had difficulty in distinguishing their personal selves from their professional selves, ultimately causing students to distance themselves from important others (Bischoff, 1997) and furthering their experience of loneliness. Beyond role conflict, students experienced diminished interpersonal connection due to stress resulting from “increased psychological mindedness,” resulting in students over-analyzing social interactions, restricting spontaneity, and reducing closeness (Farber, 1983, p. 181). This was apparent in Chris’s narrative shared above. Other factors contributing to diminished relational connection included changes in “values, interests, and opinions” on the part of the student, potentially creating an “emotional gulf” between themselves and the important others they were previously close to (Sori et al., 1996, p. 260).

Further, reduced connection could be explained by growth on the part of student unmatched by the important other. This experience was illustrated in Elise’s reference to the “gap” being too wide between herself and those she previously felt close to. Sori et al.’s (1996) study of CITs and their spouses lent credence to this phenomenon in describing the fear that rapid personal growth and development of students could cause romantic partners to “feel threatened or left behind” (p. 266). Elise’s inability to “change the person” to align with her personal growth left the relationship untenable. This was concordant with the Ward and Hamilton (2018) concept of pruning in which a prominent factor in relationship continuation was

the CITs' sense that the relationship had grown alongside the counselor's growth as they moved through their training program.

In closing, many participants found counselor training to prompt change within themselves and their relationships and included experiences of awkwardness, hardship, and emotional and psychological turmoil. These growing pains involved interpersonal challenges and discomfort within relationships with important others, leading to a sense of imbalance with once stable intimacies. Further, participants encountered growing pains in the form of loneliness. Participants often experienced a sense of isolation from themselves and their important others, resulting from elements of counselor training which had translated into professional/personal development and growth. Overall, the theme of growing pains provided a detailed account of relationship transition following the commencement of counselor training. This study fleshed out through in-depth reporting of participant narratives the broad impact of training upon student interpersonal relationships which Dahl et al. (2010) termed a "kind of butterfly effect." Contained within this butterfly effect was the notion that not only did students change during the course of counselor training, but training in fact also brought change to their entire interpersonal network. Therefore, as Dahl et al. explained, students not only brought themselves to the classroom, they also essentially brought all of their interpersonal relationships (e.g., friends, romantic partners, families of origin, children). This created a multidirectional and complex exchange which begs increased "awareness of and attention to" the CIT relational experience on the part of counselor educators (p. 3).

### **Theme Three: Overcoming and Resilience**

Challenges and hardship were inherent in counselor training and demonstrated the discomfort engrained in the transitory progress of professional/personal development and the

degree of growth necessary for counselor competency. Participants remained keenly aware of struggles encountered through counselor training, yet often reported positive outcomes of the process of personal self-growth and increased self-/other awareness. These positively valenced take-aways, though not uniform across participant experiences, appeared to align with three primary constructs: ruptures and repairs, outright benefits, and self-prioritization.

### ***Ruptures and Repairs***

Counseling identity development for participants involved changes in interpersonal behaviors, the expression of expectations and needs, and emotional fatigue, together contributing to interpersonal relationship dynamics potentially marked by a sense of discomfort and distance. Following relationship transition arising from counselor training, many participants reported on the process of successfully overcoming difficulties inherent in relational change as they progressed through programming. Some participants disclosed focusing energy and time toward the process of healing and reshaping important relationships in a way that support their new way of being and interacting, a development which this study refers to as ruptures and repairs. This process required establishing a new normal in relationship dynamics, an awkward task for participants, yet ultimately one which ensured a dynamic supportive of the participant's personal growth and relational health.

Both Jackie and Chris shared the tension of relationship dynamic reformulation, as well as their acceptance of relationship change. Jackie explained the “waxing and waning of connectedness,” a pattern of engagement and withdraw, with her close friend due to feelings of overextension and emotional fatigue credited to programmatic demands. Over time, Jackie expressed understanding for relationship fluctuations, perceiving them as a natural part of her connection with this individual. Similarly, Chris described a “falling out” with his long-time

friend during his time in counselor training, stating “we’re just not in tune with one another like we used to be.” Chris acknowledged the pain associated with this lost sense of connection, yet remained hopeful for renewed relationship intimacy: “[I]t’s hard to say that I don’t think our relationship is the same. And I’m hopeful ... maybe some things will get cleared up.” Here Chris expresses his acceptance of relationship distance and his desire to continue to work towards a new normal in this important relationship. Like Chris, Nicolai recognized her relationship with her sister had become “clunky” as a result of her personal/professional growth. She described her effort in seeking a new normal in this relationship stating, “[I]t’s still such a new sensation that ... we don’t come into it very comfortably yet because we haven’t found how that fits.”

Acceptance served as a significant supportive factor in managing relationship adjustment for Nicolai, as she reconciled the fact that at a given time perhaps “that repair work can’t happen, adding her understanding that “everything doesn’t have to be mended.” Here Nicolai acknowledges not all relationship ruptures can be repaired, a condition she found tolerable.

Murray and Kleist’s (2011) study of CIT couples’ relationships had application toward further understanding relationship change related to counselor training. They identified how counselor training developed CIT awareness around relationship dynamics, leading to relationship assessment and reconfiguration so said connections were more adept at fitting and meeting desires, standards, and expectations. Relationship restructuring involved actively changing “norms and ways of being” which included challenging rules, challenging roles, stating needs, and changing communication (p. 127). Said interpersonal changes prompted by counselor training promoted relationship change, resulting in a sense of awkwardness during the transition process. This was captured in Nicolai’s description of her “clunky” relationship with her sister and Chris’s classification of his relationship with his long-time friend as “not in tune.”



Participant narratives illustrated ruptured relationships moving towards repair. In this light, the concept of pruning could be seen in how participants valued these relationships and desired that these connections with important others grew to meet their new level of personal growth (Ward & Hamilton, 2018). The subtext of participant reports appeared to contain the understanding that there was no return to their old way of being; participants could not make a U-turn and abandon their growth, in the hopes of enabling or restoring a familiar, more comfortable relationship dynamic. The importance of these relationships for participants sustained their investment in relationship repair by establishing a new normal for all parties involved. Conversely, relationships with less value were more frequently pruned by participants. Nicolai demonstrated this with her acceptance of conflict or dynamic misfits which do not necessarily need “to be mended.” An underlying message embedded in participant narratives across theme categories seemed to be the prioritization of personal growth and development, an undertaking which urged relationship change, and thereby seeking relationships that support growth for those involved and for the connection itself.

### ***Outright Benefits***

Counselor training is a demanding process defined by difficulty, struggle, and challenge, necessitating resilience to engage obstacles in order to be successful. Participants described their progress as a journey of navigating personal and relationship adjustments. However, despite noted hardships, participants also reported receiving outright benefits of their counselor training experience, benefits which were not tied to obvious drawbacks or perceived to be double-edged swords. Solely beneficial relational dynamic changes related to training and shared by participants included an increase in awareness, the presence of encouragement and support, and a strengthened connection in relationships with important others.

A benefit expressed by all participants was that of increased self- and other-awareness as a product of the training process. Although the process of developing greater insight into oneself and others could prove problematic, draining, and stressful, participants ultimately found the outcome rewarding. Chris captured the importance of growth, insight, and awareness with his statement “[I]f you don’t grow in this program, like, I think you’ve kind of missed the point of what this program is trying to teach you, which is insight and awareness.” Many participants conceded with this point and recognized the value of enhanced awareness. John discussed the positive impact of greater awareness in his relationship with his romantic partner: “I felt like my relationship changed ... like, discovering who I am with my wife and other people.” Similarly, Ella attributed improved relationships with her family due to increased self-awareness, allowing her to recognize her personal limitations and “be a lot more honest with [her] feelings than [she] did before.” Further, growth in awareness helped Elise notice negative relationship patterns, causing her to alter her decision-making process when considering future romantic partners. This led Elise to ponder: “How did I not know any of this before?” Another participant who gained insight in relationships was Jackie in her discovery of how her awareness around components of her own identity “definitely impacted [her] friendships.”

Counseling literature has cited counselor training experiences such as multicultural education, basic counselor skills training, genogram creation, group experience, and the adoption of a personal counseling theory as eliciting helpful interpersonal and intrapersonal awareness (Murray & Kleist, 2011). Further, clinical experience has been noted as significant in contributing to increased relationship awareness with Aponte (1994) went as far as to describe therapy as a “personal encounter within a professional frame” (p. 3). Wilkinson (2011) stated how counselor competence included the ability to “practice with integrity, within specified

ethical guidelines, and with a comprehensive understanding of clients and presenting problem ... [which] require counselors to be self-aware” (p. 24). Interpersonal awareness was a key element of developing a counseling relationship, viewed as the strongest predictor of successful therapeutic outcomes (Lambert & Barley, 2001). To provide effective counseling, personal and interpersonal awareness was a necessity; it was only reasonable to assume CITs would incorporate awareness of self and others into non-counseling settings in the hopes of improving relationships and strengthening connection. This was evident in the narratives of participants in this study. With enhanced awareness students were enabled to recognize and address negative personal and interpersonal patterns, and in turn to address those patterns which impede authenticity and connectedness in relationships.

For many participants, overcoming and resilience was evident throughout counselor training by way of the outright benefit of feeling supported toward culminating greater awareness in their understanding of themselves and their interpersonal interactions with important others. This growth led CITs to formulate and maintain positive change in interpersonal relationships, enabling participants’ ability to manifest their authentic selves. Encouragement and support from important others served to both motivate and sustain participants in overcoming obstacles inherent in counselor training, enabling resilience in the face of programmatic hurdles. Such intentional assistance and backing fostered perseverance for participants when met with the rigors of counselor training. Important others’ expressed and demonstrated willingness to believe in and bolster the CITs in their lives, despite students’ own self-doubts, was perceived by participants as an outright benefit.

Lyndsey, for example, spoke to the support of her counseling peers as enabling her to develop healthier relationship patterns with romantic partners. Receiving encouragement from a

similar source, Elise noted supportive relationships with peers and professors as key toward engaging in and surmounting her experience of “imposter syndrome.” Other participants such as Ella cited family as a stabilizing factor within the uncertainty of counselor training. This sense of evenness and balance originated from her lifelong relationship with her sister, a siblingship which provided Ella with consistency and acceptance amongst seeming global change: “It’s really nice that there’s someone in my life who has known me since childhood and who has gone through a lot of those pivotal experiences with me.” For Ella, comfort lay in a relationship which remained unwavering across time and significant change, providing security via a supportive connection which could be relied upon to endure despite Ella’s experience of personal change. Although Ella could have at times worried about losing various relationships with important others due to her identity evolving throughout counselor training, her historical experience of change in the lifetime Ella shared with her sister offered a secure point from which she felt confident in weathering interpersonal transition. A helpful analogy could be to imagine a boat at anchor upon a stormy sea. In this instance, the rough waters represented the multiple personal and interpersonal struggles illustrative of the transition brought on by adopting the counselor “lifestyle” as discussed by Farber (1983). The anchor in this example represented enduring, long-term relationships which provided a grounding point for CITs and prevented students from being swept away amongst an overwhelming sense of change. Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) noted the transitional period embedded in the beginning student phase was a time marked by uncertainty and self-doubt as CITs learned different ways of being and of understanding. This uncertainty and self-doubt could be enormously destabilizing for students, a condition for which participants looked to the longtime relationships that had endured past change as secure footing by which to address present personal and interpersonal transition. It was important to note these

relatively secure relationships were in fact in a place of transformation, however, the survival of such long-term connections across time and significant development allowed participants greater confidence in their continuance of the relationship.

Ultimately, in overcoming the hardships and rigor of counselor training, encouragement and support provided by important others increased participant resilience in addressing change. The security of longtime relationships was perceived as an outright benefit which allowing participants to move toward positive change both personally and interpersonally. Additionally, connections which withstood past change and had continued to be characterized by understanding and acceptance often provided a sense of stability and comfort as CITs navigated the often-turbulent training experience.

Another outright benefit described by several participants reflected how counselor development had helped to strengthen connections between CITs and important others, a sign of overcoming and resilience which deepened closeness, increased understanding, and bolstered authenticity. Elise articulated how her personal growth, an outcome of counselor training, enhanced the closeness she harbored with her long-time friend, “I would say we’re probably closer now than we ever have been. But it’s different. I would say the dynamic’s more mature now ... just we’re all grown up and stuff.” Similarly, John related the “deeper level” of connection he currently shared with his partner due to both parties undergoing personal growth because of his training. John and his partner’s strengthened relationship wholly aligns with Murray and Kleist’s (2011) findings which touched upon CITs experiencing an “enhanced connection” with their partners leading to “powerful experiences of becoming closer with their partners” (p. 127).

Both Elise and John recognized a strengthened connection with an important other prompted by the personal growth they experienced as a result of their training. This demonstrated the “butterfly effect” presented by Dahl et al. (2010) wherein counseling training did not consist solely of students bringing themselves to “classrooms, practica, and supervision sessions,” but instead CITs “bring with them, for example, their families of origin, their friends, their children, and--for those who are married--their spouses” (p. 3). In this way, the impacts of training were demonstrably not isolated to the student alone; the impacts and upshots expand outward to CITs’ relational constellation. Participant narratives exemplified the transmission of personal growth to important others, extending an outright benefit beyond the limits of the counseling program itself.

***Self-Prioritization; “Putting Me First.”***

Nearly all participants expressed appreciation for the process of pushing through the barrier of what felt to be a cultural-imposed perception of selflessness and prioritizing their individual needs to balance responsibilities and personal wellbeing. Participants encountered obstacles to self-prioritization which included changing “norms and ways of being” within relationships with important others. However, many remained motivated to generate greater authenticity within interpersonal connections through expressing their felt needs (Murray & Kleist, 2011, p. 127). Participants’ journeys towards self-prioritization required resilience in the face of pushback from those in their interpersonal circles. In this way, counselors-in-training articulated their relational journey as encompassing two primary foci, first of self-efficacy and confidence, followed by self-advocacy and boundary setting.

Most participants mentioned recognized growth in terms of their own sense of self-efficacy and confidence following the initiation of counselor training, a feeling which enhanced

their own self-value and degree of personal empowerment. The process of training was not without difficulty and frequently catalyzed personal doubts around participants' goodness-of-fit as future counselors. That said, with time and experience these worries were replaced by a recognition of competence and a heightened belief in self for most CITs. To exemplify this path from insecurity to self-efficacy and confidence, Chris related how he was intentional about developing himself as a CIT, evolving as a person was one of Chris's primary goals throughout programming. Chris went so far as to state he was "proud" of the work he had put in and the outcomes he had achieved. As noted throughout Chris's narrative, his experience of counselor training was extremely challenging and often felt overwhelming. Despite this, Chris understood both his personal need for change and programmatic expectations around change, recognizing how the combination was necessary in order to achieve true counselor competency. Regardless of the challenges and discomfort of counselor training, the end result was a sense of accomplishment and pride in Chris's enhanced self-efficacy.

In hindsight, Nicolai expressed how she would advise herself to have more confidence and belief in herself so as to better weather the personal insecurities generated by counselor training: "Give yourself more credit. Stand tall and just keep going and give yourself more credit than you are [giving yourself]." Ella shared how her experience of self-exploration and the increased insight gained through counselor training contributed to "the sense of self and intuition" which led to Ella "just trusting [her] gut" when engaging the unknown. Ella's narrative clearly illustrated the growth of self-efficacy and confidence participants credited to their undergoing counselor training. Through Lyndsey's advice to her past CIT-self, this participant made evident the importance of self-trust as a prominent factor in overcoming the challenges

inherent in counselor training and the resilience born of addressing said challenges, ultimately reminding herself to just “be [her]self.”

Counseling literature drew a direct correlation between elements of counselor training and increased student self-efficacy (Halverson et al., 2006). One such element was the development of cognitive complexity, seen to be related to increased autonomy, self-efficacy, self-awareness, ambiguity tolerance, empathy, and the reduction of anxiety, prejudice, and self-focus (Brendel et al., 2002; Choate & Granello, 2006; Granello, 2010). Other noted factors related to increased self-efficacy included clinical supervision and experiential learning activities (Meola et al., 2022). Further, higher levels of self-efficacy were correlated with counselor competency (Halverson et al., 2006).

Greater understanding of self, interpersonal dynamics, communication skills, experience in relational engagement, understanding of and aptitude in addressing conflict (ruptures and repairs), and experiential classroom practice coordinately contributed to increased self-efficacy and confidence for CITs as they begin working with clients. Counseling knowledge acquisition, skill development, and self-efficacy are some of the many goals of counselor training, important factors in building counselor competency. It would appear probable that the enhanced self-efficacy and confidence gained by trainees would extend to personal relationships. Participant narratives illustrated how the growth of personal self-efficacy and confidence enabled self-prioritization within interpersonal relationships, contributing to participants making the choice to “put themselves first,” an endeavor frequently accompanied by intentional interpersonal change. Although the process of relationship transition was complicated and often painful, participants perceived self-prioritization within relationships as generally positive and wholly necessary.



Also embedded within the conversation around self-efficacy and confidence, participants described their newfound self-prioritization as made manifest within their tendency for and capacity towards self-advocacy and boundary setting. Participants stated how their training provided the learning and experience to prepare them to advocate for personal needs, values, and beliefs within interpersonal relationships. Further, counselor training heightened motivation and comfort toward self-advocacy, leading to an increased effort to establish and maintain healthier relationships with important others.

Ella captured the movement towards self-advocacy, conveying that her voice was valuable, and she deserved to be heard in her close connection with her sister. This altered Ella's stance from one which actively avoided relationship conflict to one dedicated to addressing interpersonal instances in which Ella felt "resentful," an experience due to perceived mistreatment or relational imbalance. Ella expressed efforts toward correcting relationship imbalance, mentioning the value in clearly communicating her experience and relationship needs. In relation to setting boundaries in her interactions with extended family, Ella stated: "I've had those conversations ... and I've been pretty direct about it, and they've understood and been able to [change] that." Nicolai recognized how her self-exploration and subsequent greater self-understanding intensified her capacity to self-advocate in relationships: "I think the biggest thing about it is knowing who I am and what my needs are and being able to advocate for those." Here Nicolai recognized her needs as valid, thereby providing a foundation from which to demand these needs be seen and met within relationships with important others.

Similarly, due to counseling program demands Chris found himself emotionally and mentally depleted, causing him to protect his "empathy battery" by setting firmer boundaries within interpersonal relationships. Chris acknowledged "there's only so much you can give to

people” and part of his process of self-protection and self-care was to create and maintain stronger separation between himself and those close to him. Counselor training assisted participants in establishing healthier boundaries in personal relationships, demonstrated also by Nicolai’s discussion of her relationship with her sister when she explained her increased comfort in establishing limitations in her siblingship and stating clearly and directly her needs. Further, Nicolai articulated her acceptance of the necessity of maintaining healthy boundaries despite the cost: “Especially now after the program, when people maybe aren’t changing and aren’t willing to make that growth ... I’m not gonna spend an overabundance of energy ... and that’s okay. And then move on to something else.” Similarly, Lyndsey also provided insight into participant adherence to relationship boundaries, connecting self-advocacy to the maintenance of self-care and empowerment in her relationships with important others. Lyndsey described her newfound tendency to prioritize her own needs where before “[she] would, like, not think of [her]self first and just help anyone who needed help.”

Counseling literature stated counselors have been charged to advocate with and on behalf of clients as a means to “fulfill their core professional value of promoting social justice” (Fickling & González, 2016, p. 174). Therefore, CITs have been tasked with learning advocacy skills to meet professional expectations. Self-advocacy has been linked to student counselor identity development and has been viewed as a means by which students learn to advocate for their clients (Luke et al., 2020). As seen within existing literature, advocacy for clients has been a key element of counselor training and student self-advocacy as a part of advocacy skill development. Despite the importance of self-advocacy in counselor development “limited attention, however, has been paid to training CITs in self-advocacy” (Luke et al., 2020, p. 15). This lack of attention has extended to the impact of self-advocacy upon CIT interpersonal

relationships. The present study shed light on this outcome of counselor training in that participants applied advocacy skills acquired through training to their personal lives. Participants related narratives of asserting personal needs and values, as well as relationship needs and expectations with important others. Self-advocacy for participants often involved protecting said needs through boundary setting in relationships. Bischoff (1997) suggested that boundary setting with friends and family is a result of role conflict as students transitioned from lay helper to that of professional helper, potentially leading to CITs seeking to limit interaction with important others. This role conflict was resolved as students became more comfortable in balancing their newfound professional role with their personal relationships. At this point, CITs ceased to avoid family and friends due to reduction of their fear around said role conflict. This process often involved the re-establishment and/or clarification of new boundaries in personal relationships. This evolution was evident in participant narratives, whereby training resulted in relational distance for some participants and the alteration of boundaries or establishment of new boundaries with the intent of creating an environment in which participants could be more fully themselves or more fully present within their new versions of self. Participant efforts toward self-advocacy and boundary setting could be an outcome of applying skills learned in training, yet there appeared to be an additional element at play which Elise described as a “practice-what-you-preach kind of thing.” This notion consisted of a desire to be authentic and to represent professional values and identity, with participants seeking to incorporate behaviors into their personal lives which they encouraged for their clients.

Additionally, there appeared to be a link between the process of self-exploration and increased self-awareness, as well as the humanistic view of the inherent value of human beings found in counseling training which together worked to enhance participant self-valuation.

Through working with clients, engaging in complex issues, and promoting client self-valuation, participants underwent an augmented recognition of their own personal worth. Further, participant narratives revealed how CITs prioritizing their own needs within relationships was requisite to maintaining self-care in the face of the multiple demands of counselor training. Without this self-advocacy participants could lack the emotional and mental resources needed to sustain competency when working with clients. This perspective aligned with the “being needs” of personal development which included “authenticity, interpersonal engagement, intimacy and self-valuation” (Elton-Wilson, 1994, as cited in Donati, & Watts, 2005, p. 476).

As participants advanced in counselor training and their counselor identity developed, many gained self-efficacy and confidence which contributed to self-prioritization. Through a perspective shift, CITs no longer viewed self-advocacy as an act of selfishness, but rather a necessity in maintaining their personal and relational health, as well as to sustain their ability to meet client needs. The process of self-advocacy resulted in CITs setting healthy boundaries with important others to protect their needs and conserve the mental and emotional reserves depleted by counselor training. Despite the difficulties of self-prioritization, over time participants came to appreciate the value of self-advocacy and boundary setting in developing greater relationship and personal health.

Counselor identity development was often challenging, confusing, draining, and, at times, overwhelming. In conjunction with professional development, students grew and developed on a personal level, change which impacted them on multiple fronts and extended to their interpersonal relationships. With time, perspective, and progressive development, many participants recognized some aspects of their personal and interpersonal change as a journey of overcoming and resilience leading to positive outcomes. Through a process of relationship

rupture and repair stemming from participants asserting a new way of being with important others following their counselor training, many CITs created new relationship dynamics which more fully supported their needs and reduced limitations to manifesting their authentic selves. Several participants acknowledged outright benefits of counselor training which included increased awareness of self and others, encouragement and support in relationships, and strengthened support from others. Further, participants learned and practiced skills within their counselor programs which enhanced their ability to increase their self-prioritization in a manner that allowed them to believe in themselves, advocate for their needs both on a personal and interpersonal level, and set healthy boundaries to protect said needs.

### **Overlap and Interconnection**

Although both necessary and helpful to present and discuss subtopics as unique, discrete patterns identified from participant narratives, it was prudent to take a moment and consider evidence of overlap and interconnectedness as demonstrated by said narratives. Because the lived experience of personal growth and relationship change as shared by CITs illuminated the highly complex intercourse of various interpersonal spheres, it would make sense that common subtopics gleaned through this study would also refuse to exist in isolation. In reviewing each subtopic with an eye for such linkages, it was determined that several interesting inter-theme and inter-sub-theme overlaps were not only evident, they were also meaningful. Subtopic linkages showed the compounded nature of change which occurred for CITs. Experiences and outcomes were not singular or separate, they were not solely demonstrative of overlapping benefit (“good,” positive outcomes) or overlapping distress (“bad,” negative outcomes). Instead, relationship growth and change throughout training was layered, nuanced, and intersectional.

Perhaps the most obvious example of such interconnectedness were those linkages shared with the subtopic of self-advocacy and boundary setting. As defined for the purpose of identifying this pattern among participant narratives, this subtopic represented CITs finding the voice and the courage to defend themselves, their beliefs, and their values, including but not limited to the establishment and maintenance of healthy boundaries in relationships with important others. Participant narratives reflected these sentiments, frequently tying both the concepts of self-advocacy and boundary setting to other identified subthemes. Exemplifying this discovery, Nicolai described the relationship between her experience of the subtheme mental health and responsibility as pertained to the subtopic of (caring for) others. For Nicolai, determining she was not in fact responsible for the psychological wellness of those she related to in non-counseling settings felt like a helpful and necessary boundary to establish. Despite wanting to be supportive and generous with her time and talents, Nicolai articulated how healthy she had found the setting of this particular boundary, placed out of recognition she was not in fact responsible for forcing mental health change in the lives of those around her. In this way, a clear overlap was illustrated between confusion and insecurity > mental health and responsibility > others and overcoming and resilience > self-prioritization > self-advocacy and boundary setting.

Similarly, in describing her reaction to being solicited for counseling in non-counseling settings, Ella's narrative presented a further example of interconnectedness. Following a description of how she had related to various extended family members over the course of her time in counselor training, Ella reported feeling "used and like just drained, you know ... and a little bit resentful," describing the experience of both enduring the subtopics of emotional fatigue and an absence of reciprocity and mutuality. The exhaustion and acrimony elicited by these

important others seeking therapeutic help and support from Ella appeared then to propel her toward increased self-advocacy and boundary setting. Despite feeling used and exhausted from these interactions, Ella went on to explain the process of discussing her need to self-defend and self-preserve for the betterment of her own wellness. In candidly establishing boundary-related expectations with important others, Ella stated:

So, a lot of the people in my life that I love and that I've, that have stuck around, I've had those [boundary] conversations with, and I've been pretty direct about it, and they've understood and been able to do that.

Therefore, Ella's experience of overcoming and resilience > self-prioritization > self-advocacy and boundary setting demonstrated a two-pronged linkage with (a) growing pains > relationship imbalances and disequilibrium > emotional fatigue and (b) growing pains > relationship imbalances and disequilibrium > reciprocity and mutuality.

Furthermore, many CITs attributed their capacity for improved boundary setting to the subtopic of increased awareness, detailing how the knowledge and skills they were gathering academically and applying professionally educated them about the importance of boundaries, provided them opportunities to establish these relational limitations, and then offered instances of challenge and pushback toward the honing of competent boundary maintenance. In her narrative, Elise described how the subtopic of increased awareness greatly augmented her view and understanding of her own marriage, noting how this growth in knowledge and skills was linked to the subtopic of self-advocacy and boundary setting: "I actually, I got divorced during my grad program because we were learning, oh, this is what healthy boundaries are, [and what] healthy relationships look like." For Elise, overcoming and resilience > self-prioritization > self-

advocacy and boundary setting was seen to be inextricably tied to the subtopic of overcoming and resilience > self-prioritization > increased awareness.

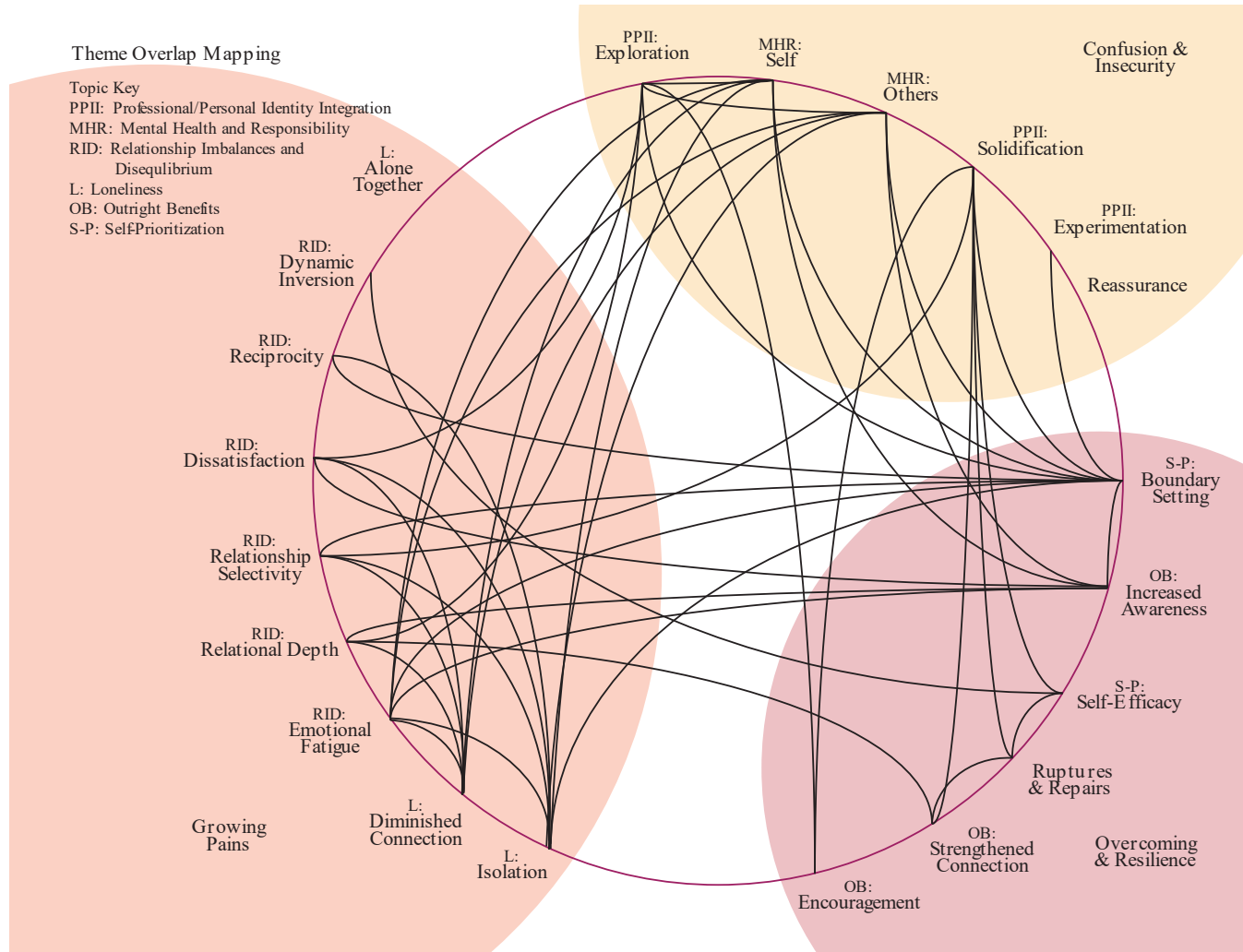
Although the examples included above appear to illustrate how challenges underwent early in the training process could be in some way corrected or alleviated by the subtopic self-advocacy and boundary setting, it should too be noted how this subtopic overlapped or even reinforced a more negatively valenced outcome. Throughout his narrative, Chris described various areas of ingress for the experience of the subtopic isolation. In many cases, Chris found it difficult to navigate the balance between allowing too many and too few relationships into his more intimate interpersonal sphere, longing at times for the ostensive simplicity of pre-counselor training interactions with important others. When it came to self-advocacy and boundary setting, Chris acknowledged the value and importance of taking these steps toward his own self-preservation and self-care. Unfortunately, because the reactions and responses Chris received when applying this subtopic were often unsupportive and/or reluctant, Chris was left feeling neglected and alone. Fully able to acknowledge the benefits of self-advocacy and boundary setting, Chris's own experience with both demonstrated considerable overlap with the subtopic of isolation, leading overcoming and resilience > self-prioritization > self-advocacy and boundary setting to reinforce for Chris a sense of growing pains > loneliness > isolation.

In total, when subtopics were reanalyzed for inter-subtopic overlap, it was established that the subtopic of Self-Advocacy and Boundary Setting alone had, in fact, 10 overlaps with other subtopics as expressed by participant narratives. Figure 1 illustrates visually the linkages determined to exist between established subthemes/subtopics.



**Figure 1**

*Sub-Theme and Sub-Topic Overlap*



## Implications

Overall, the primary finding of this study revolved around the broad repercussions of counselor training upon students, a phenomenon which has been poorly understood and not well represented in counseling literature. Participants in this study provided insight into personal, professional, and relational change resulting from training. CIT narratives illustrated the internal change prompted by counselor curriculum which expanded outward, effecting participants' interpersonal relationships. Initially, as beginning students, CITs experienced a stage of confusion and insecurity where they sought to integrate an enormous amount of information proffered by their counseling program. It was important to note that the material presented by counseling faculty was not limited to the acquisition of academic knowledge, but rather was the demand to reformulate oneself personally and interpersonally. In other professional training programs this could be considered an inappropriate over-reach. It is, however, a standard expectation within counselor training. In fact, this change has been seen as essential for counselor identity development and insuring counselor competency, yet considering the magnitude of this expectation, it must be approached with empathy, compassion, sensitivity, and understanding on the part of faculty. Although the process of professional and personal identity integration is a journey fraught with challenges that this study describes as growing pains, transitions CITs must primarily resolve independently, this does not exclude faculty supporting students by directly addressing the complexities of professional transition. In fact, this acknowledgement of the personal and interpersonal challenges inherent in counselor training, which this study revealed resulted in relationship disequilibrium and loneliness, would likely provide the reassurance which participants in this study noted as essential toward supporting their professional development. Faculty support and encouragement in the face of the confusion

and insecurity of personal/professional development and integration could allow students comfort during a necessarily uncomfortable process. Students must travel an individualized path in counselor identity development, yet the pervading sense of isolation amid the twists and turns of this journey could be minimized through the recognition of possible personal and interpersonal challenges along the way. By doing so, faculty could support students in avoiding potential relationship pitfalls and ethically questionable behaviors such as counseling friends and family. This conversation should include instruction regarding the role of counseling students in terms of managing their personal mental wellness and the mental health of others. This could include reflective assignments, group discussions, and/or ethical case studies which analyze the employment of newly acquired counseling knowledge and skills within interpersonal relationships. Additionally, information regarding the process of relationship rupture and repair described by participants in this study as they progressed through their training program may provide further reassurance for students and a sense of stability during a period of relationship imbalance. Further exploration of both the challenges and outright benefits of counseling training could allow for a balancing of perspective as students engage immediate personal and interpersonal hardship. This conversation could and should include a discussion of the obstacles and importance of self-prioritization.

Overall, intentional, deliberate dissection of the CIT experience on a personal and interpersonal front could comprise an integral part of comprehensive counseling programming. If applied effectively, it may universalize the difficulties of the transitional journey from lay helper to beginning student to that of advanced student, providing a greater sense of security and comfort for CITs. Through the standardization of counselor identity development challenges in counseling curriculum, along with supplying specific examples as described by participant

narratives in this study, voice would be given to student experiences which could otherwise remain hidden and therefore unaddressed by faculty. By having these conversations in the classroom students would come to understand they are not alone in their professional/personal identity integration obstacles. Further, by addressing these issues in a formal setting faculty could gain greater understanding of student needs, allowing for appropriate scaffolding to assist in student success. Some participants in this study contributed unsolicited evidence to support the significance of processing these issues by stating their engagement in the research interview was beneficial in of itself. Chris remarked how the interview had “absolutely” and “a hundred percent” positively impacted his perception of topics discussed and John noted how the conversation had been “really therapeutic” for him. For more information, see Future Directions.

This study illuminated, through participant stories, that students struggle in ways that faculty are often challenged to identify. Some questions leading to confusion and insecurity revealed by participants included: am I an appropriate fit for the counseling field (am I good enough)? What are the rules in using counseling skills and knowledge with important others? How do I apply skills in an appropriate manner? What is my responsibility in terms of my mental health and the mental health of my friends and family? Some of these questions students must answer independently. Others, however, could be clarified or answered outright by faculty. Addressing questions often neglected because of student fear, confusion, inexperience, or uncertainty would act as a protective factor for CITs on a personal and interpersonal level.

This obligation to address CIT personal and interpersonal developmental issues throughout counselor training begs the question of where to house such instruction within programming already laden with heavy curriculum demands. Counseling programs vary, allowing the inclusion of this topic to reflect what best meets programmatic structure and needs.

It would appear evident that this topic might be accommodated within a counseling orientation course, however students would lack the mid-program context which would boost the immediacy, necessity, and helpfulness of this information. This researcher recommends this information would be most effective if presented in multiple classes following student progression through the program to keep pace with the dynamism and fluidity of student needs in coordination with developmental stage. Suggested course adjustments which seem appropriate would be the provision of counselor development stage models in counseling orientation, followed by group discussions, reflective assignments, and/or case studies in both counseling ethics (as suggested by the participant Jackie) and theory classes. Further, there appears to be value in structuring a student personal growth group, which is commonly provided in association with group counseling courses, to focus on counselor development issues. Finally, clinically focused classes such as pre-practicum and practicum could include this topic. Of vital importance is the revisitation of this topic across counseling programming to account for student development progress and the evolution of student needs.

The final word in how counseling programs could provide improved support for students in addressing personal and interpersonal challenges must be given by this study's participants. CITs requested faculty make more time for students and form more sincere relationships with them, as well as, in Lyndsey's words, to consider "where they were when they were in the student's shoes." Nicolai requested her instructors be "receptive advocate[s]" for students: "advocate that your students have what it takes and [give] them more credit." Elise asked for faculty to be more vulnerable with students by "owning that they're human." Chris reported a need for counseling programs to be more active in building community among students. John requested greater openness to having "dialogue about opposing ideas" in that he did not always

experience freedom to discuss his values and viewpoint. Elise requested help in setting realistic goals to deter perfectionism and dispel the counseling students desire “to save the world.” Jackie encouraged faculty to clarify the prioritization of CITs’ “own mental health above others.” Further, Jackie voiced the value of an advanced counseling theories course following the commencement of clinical work which focused on counselor identity development, stating “most people take theories early on ... I really wish there was a theories class later when you actually have some kind of idea of like who the hell you are as a therapist.” And finally, Elise expressed her belief that counseling programs should require students to engage in personal counseling: “I almost think it’s unethical for people to go through a counseling program and not be in therapy. I just can’t imagine you’re not working through your own personal stuff that, that comes up while being in a grad program.”

In conclusion, this study provided an in-depth, informative account of how CITs experienced personal and interpersonal change related to counselor training. This study was a source of information for both students and counseling faculty to better understand the obstacles, challenges, struggles, and discomfort associated with counselor development. With greater knowledge available regarding some of the specific experiences of transition from lay helper to beginning student and on to advanced student as voiced in this study, counseling students could be better prepared to address what they endure in terms of personal and interpersonal change. Additionally, the awareness generated by this study could be a source of comfort in their personal journey of counselor training, as well as to enhance resilience in the overcoming of obstacles inherent in the counselor development process. Further, this study allowed for greater insight into the CIT experience, providing a resource for faculty as a reminder of their own evolution in the counseling field, allowing them to effectively walk in their “student’s shoes.” By

fostering greater immediacy with the CIT experience, faculty members have the opportunity to provide empathic support, appropriate scaffolding, and program design to promote student success.

### **Limitations**

Constraints and influences which impacted various elements of this study's execution and resulting findings must be identified and explained. The intention here is to acknowledge the potential impact limitations could have had on the research process, to consider how said limitations may affect study outcomes, and to recognize ways by which said limitations could be better avoided or mitigated were similar research to be conducted in the future. For more information and suggestions around study suggestions, see Future Directions below.

### **Diversity and Transferability**

Participant sampling has been an area of the research process frequently fraught with challenges even considering the relative freedoms built into IPA's decidedly phenomenological approach. This study incorporated purposive sampling procedures. Generally, the goal of qualitative research sampling has been not to obtain a representative sample of a specific population, but rather to seek participants who "provide key insight and understandings" of the phenomena (Abrams, 2010, p. 537). The sample size of IPA studies has been small to allow for detailed case analysis in order for participant stories to be fully appreciated and so researchers may "concentrate more on depth, rather than breadth of the study" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 9). Despite the value of purposive sampling, this practice can limit participant diversity.

Diversity among participants adds a richness to any data collected, as a multitude of histories, backgrounds, and experiences offers an opportunity for variety to be both expressed and valued in the research process. Further, diversity can have the added benefit of increasing the

transferability of study findings. Transferability attends to how easily a study's findings can be applied to alternative populations and settings. In this way, findings with higher transferability can be applied more generally and may tell contemporaries in the field more about the broader picture in answer to a study's research questions. Due to the idiographic quality of interpretative phenomenological analysis, participants were limited in number, a factor which impacted transferability (R. M. Miller et al., 2018). That said, when a study's sample population is more homogenous this is not an indication of outcomes which are less interesting or less important. Instead, homogeneity narrows the transferability, essentially zooming in on a specific population for which the research is most telling.

In this study, limitations to diversity and, thereby, the transferability of findings, were related to demographic components of participant identity. CITs who took part in this research self-identified by responding to open-ended prompts and were not offered multiple choice options. As confirmed by Table 1, all seven participants self-identified as either "white" or "Caucasian," with one participant additionally self-identifying as "Hispanic." Another demographic commonality shared was age, with participants ranging from 23- to 36-years-old. This placed the entire sample population in the lifespan segment in-between young adult and middle-aged adult. How participants self-identified in terms of gender demonstrated further uniformity as five of the seven interviewees described themselves as "female" or "woman." The majority of participants were also on the master's in Clinical Mental Health Counseling track, with only two interviewees receiving their master's in School Counseling. Further evidence of homogeneity was program location, with five of the seven pursuing their degree at one specific counselor training program (various campuses) and six of the seven participants attending counselor training in the same state.



It should be noted that research around who enters counselor training and descriptions of CIT demographics has supported some of the homogeneity described above to be limiting factors. Although much needed change has been slowly taking form, systemic barriers to accessing higher education are still a very real obstacle for many people of color, regardless of the intended degree or field of study. In CACREP's (2018) most recently released Vital Statistics report, it was indicated that nearly 60% of master's students in accredited counselor programs identify as "Caucasian/White," a disproportion indeed present (to an even greater degree) within this study. Moreover, graduate school has been typically undertaken in one's mid-20s to mid-30s, a slice of time in which individuals are eager to move away from entry level work and establish themselves professionally. This is also often a time of intense personal growth and identity exploration/solidification. Exemplifying this, the University of Northern Colorado allowed that 47% of students enrolled in graduate programming (all disciplines) for the Spring 2022 semester were between the ages of 25 and 34, aligning closely with this study's sample population (University of Northern Colorado, 2022).. Another element present in this study's participant demographics and supported by CACREP statistics was the gender breakdown, as nearly 83% of individuals pursuing master's in counseling fields self-identify as women. As illustrated here, elements conveying a lack of diversity within this study have too been represented within counselor education as a whole. Clearly these imbalances represent a larger issue, likely propelled by resource limitations, lack of access, and age- and gender-based stereotypes.

### **Counselor Development Stage**

Throughout the interview and transcript analysis process, it became evident that although participants were at similar places in their programming trajectory in terms of coursework and in accordance with the study's established eligibility criteria, this did not necessarily translate to

counselor development stage uniformity. Rønnestad and Skovholt's (2003) breakdown included a series of counselor development stages which help structure discussions around CIT progress throughout this study and help illustrate the range of development demonstrated by participants' narratives. As hypothesized by this researcher, the stages of lay helper, beginning student, and advanced student felt most accurate in capturing participant experience within the scope of this study. That acknowledged, however, the spectrum stretching between lay helper and advanced student as represented among the sample population proved to be a far wider breadth of knowledge acquisition, skills application, identity exploration, and degree of self/other awareness than originally predicted.

Because components of one participant's narrative around relational change and personal growth could demonstrate obvious depth, intention, and comprehensiveness while another's raised immediate red flags around ethical practice and competence, the fact that the sample population could not be controlled for stage of counselor development in some ways made study findings less concentrated and precise. This wide variation in terms of personal and professional evolution also made comparing/contrasting participant experiences less meaningful because there was so much stratification. While clearly a limitation, this element may prove potentially difficult to correct or control for in terms of refining eligibility criteria, since, as a rule, a lack of awareness necessarily decreases the accuracy of self-report and many CITs in the beginning stages of counselor development may not have the insight to accurately assess their own progression. Therefore, even if the researcher were to provide participants with a rubric of Rønnestad and Skovholt's stages of development the resulting participant self-reports may not prove incredibly helpful. Alternatively, the researcher could elect to evaluate and then categorize participants himself as part of the transcript analysis process, allowing for more closely matched

comparisons and findings connected to specific stages of counselor development. This approach could have greater weight and meaning were the sample population to be slightly expanded in order to better accommodate intra-sample comparison/differentiation.

### **Preliminary Mental Health Assessment**

A further factor potentially limiting the applicability of study findings was a lack of information about participants' pre-program mental health. This knowledge would have provided a sort of baseline for understanding the changes and transitions endured by so many participants. For example, if participants had entered counselor programming feeling insecure around their own mental wellness and uncertain about the condition of important relationships, would that pattern have been evident in the findings of a study such as this? How one perceived and experienced their own mental and relational journey prior to entering a counseling program could have the potential to impact their progression as CITs and would have provided this study greater insight into the student experience and related counselor development trends.

### **Recruitment and Retention**

A final limitation met over the course of this study's execution was in relation to both the initial recruitment of participants to the study and the secondary retention of participants once recruited. Highly specific and narrow eligibility criteria supported the focus and precision of this study while simultaneously decreasing the number of suitable individuals, challenging the recruitment process. A further variable which appeared to impact the researcher's access to potential participants was the progression of the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout 2021 during the recruitment stage of the study, students involved in counseling programming were being asked to extend themselves and adapt their lives in seemingly innumerable ways. Transitioning between in-person and virtual modalities in terms of counselor training, reorganizing to satisfy

potential work-from-home arrangements, managing personal and/or familial bouts of serious illness, figuring out remote schooling and childcare alternatives for participants with children, the list goes on. With the many academic, personal, and professional demands exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, potential participants likely felt overextended to a degree which precluded their involvement in this study. Additionally, and to be expected, a request for research participants being unincentivized is nearly guaranteed to constrict the number of interested parties.

Beyond the initial process of enticing participants' involvement, retaining CITs beyond the first interview proved difficult. As established within the methodological parameters of this study, the researcher's hope was to carry out a primary interview with each participant with the potential for a second, follow-up interview if appropriate and amenable to all parties. While three of the seven participants responded to the researcher's outreach regarding said follow-up discussion, two provided limited feedback by email, and two remained entirely unresponsive to any outreach, neglecting even to decline and potentially limiting the depth and extent of overall findings for those individuals with whom second interviews were not conducted.

## **Future Directions in Research**

### **Burgeoning Subthemes**

Because specific subthemes and topics did not meet a preponderance of participants' experience, three distinct patterns were not presented as official findings. That said, the fact these subthemes appeared among fewer participants does not negate their overall research value. They are noted here as suggested areas for future study and include esotericism, others' perceptions of mental health professionals, and expressed negative outcomes of increased awareness.

### *Esotericism*

A few participants described the experience of counselor esotericism, a sense that through their programming they had been initiated into a counselor-minded culture which, because of it containing theories, values, and beliefs lesser-known external to the counselor training setting, had the potential to over-bond them to their peers in training and emphasize the disparities between their evolving counselor-selves and those on the “outside.” This experience appeared to leave many participants conflicted, feeling a sense of specialness for knowledge acquired simultaneous to a sense of isolation for having acquired it, a sense of isolation which was illustrated in stark contrast when attempting to relate in relationships with non-counselor important others. In describing how enhanced relational selectivity has impacted her experience of connecting with others, Elise expressed the difficulty inherent in both knowing a great deal and feeling there are few appropriate places for such knowledge to be ethically shared, stating: “[H]ow do I compartmentalize this? What are reasonable expectations for this relationship, knowing that they don’t, they don’t know what I know?” In order to best manage the sensation of being in some ways an “outsider” within non-counseling settings, Elise looked to ways in which she was an “insider” among her counseling peers. Discussing the challenges of programming, Elise stated:

[E]very counselor kind of feels imposter syndrome at some point. That was also really helpful. When I would talk to my peers or I would talk to my professors, I felt sometimes I felt like they were the only people at the time that could understand me or what I was going through. So that was really helpful.

Because counselor training imbued students with specific knowledge and skillsets, both a sensation of specialness and intra-peer understanding took place in Elise’s experience. This

esotericism, however, often served to augment her sense of isolation within the relationships she held with important others outside counselor programming.

### ***Others' Perceptions of Mental Health Professionals***

Another burgeoning subtheme extracted from a few participants' experiences conceptualized the disconnect in understanding which was often felt by CITs from the viewpoint of their important others, most notably how individuals outside the mental health field perceived the growing professional identity of the CITs with whom they maintained relationships. These participants remarked on feeling pressured to educate and inform important others around the counselor identity and professional ethical standards, as well as to debunk erroneous beliefs and expectations around who counselors are and how they are presumed to behave personally and professionally. Exemplifying this experience, Chris articulated the challenges he had faced in managing cultural or societal judgments around what is perceived to be a stereotypical counselor identity, explaining how "some people are even scared to talk to [him] about things because they're like, 'Oh, he's a counselor, whatever, blah, blah, blah.'" Likely a product of how mental health professionals are represented in the media, combined with the potential for individuals' to have had negative historical experiences with psychological professionals, Chris found himself combatting a reputation which did not necessarily place him in a favorable light, nor did it embody his personal counselor identity:

It's just tough because ... it's always, like, that constant battle of ... who's actually wanting to be in my life? Who's not? And I guess again, mixing that, those counselor characteristics in my ... relationships. Like, everyone expects ... me to be, like, this super empathetic listener, you know, that is always going to attend to their problems, you know? And I just can't do that.

As the field of mental health has continued to evolve and progress, perceptions of mental health professionals also demonstrate change and forward movement. That said, a few participants found that the stereotypes and judgments around counseling held by important others were difficult to contend with and surmount.

### *Dark Side of Increased Awareness*

Furthermore, although most participants articulated the experience of increased awareness from counselor training being primarily positive and beneficial, another important burgeoning subtheme hinted at by a few participants related to the experience of augmented consciousness feeling challenging to the point of ultimately being harmful. These CITs characterized their current experience by a lack of comfort or familiarity with self and others, connecting the sense of unease to increases in self-/other-awareness and personal introspection. In recounting the difficulty in reconciling her growing awareness of self and others, Elise spoke of feeling “dumped on” and not having the appropriate tools or skills honed to manage such evolving knowledge:

[T]hat’s when I think a lot of students start struggling, because it’s like we’re all diagnosing our family members or we’re all, like, recognizing these patterns in ourselves. And we’re just freaking the fuck out ... my whole life feels like I did not know any of this about myself or my family or my, you know, these patterns.

Similar to the hardships Elise attributed to the process of enhanced awareness, Chris remarked on how his experience of coursework catalyzed a process in which he began to “analyze” himself and “pick [him]self apart.” He explained his augmented understanding of personal relationships and behaviors as “kinda going down that hole” in a way which felt undesirable, uncomfortable, and largely out of Chris’s control: “It kind of fucked me up.” Despite the many benefits CITs felt

they gleaned from gaining greater awareness and understanding of self and others, it was helpful to recognize that this positive experience was not comprehensive, and many participants grappled with the fallout of their newly acquired perspective.

### **Impact of Research Process on Participants**

When considering study outcomes, it was additionally important to recognize impact outside of collected findings and subsequently identified themes. Because qualitative, interview-based research has been founded upon intentional interaction and interpersonal engagement, participants remarked on ways by which the interview process itself affected them in the moment and colored their overall perception of topics discussed. The very experience of responding to interview questions and dialoging with a researcher was potentially meaningful as interactions between human beings are dynamic, fluid, and inherently harbor impact. These conversations did not occur within a vacuum and, as such, several CITs reflected unprompted on their experience of discussing relational change as it occurred throughout counselor programming. As his interview wound down, John noted how the conversation had been “really therapeutic” for him, going on to elaborate:

I’ve never really got to sit down and talk about the whole thing and I’m coming to the end [of counselor training]. You know, it was just, you know, talking about really going from you know, that fairytale place to where I am now. I thought about it like that. Yeah, so that was therapeutic.

John noted ways by which his counselor training had been colored by interesting structural and social elements, including a completely online program modality, undulations related to the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccination protocol, and feeling politically underrepresented within his cohort. In recounting these factors during the interview process and relating said factors to



observed changes within his relationships with important others, John expressed how he felt both affirmed and validated in his experience. An appreciation for the study's interview proceedings was echoed by Chris as he remarked toward conversation close on how "be[ing] able to process with someone has just helped a lot." Chris described his progression through counselor training as being marred by challenges related to distinguishing between personal and professional identities, an experience which frequently left Chris feeling conflicted, isolated, and emotionally exhausted. Subsequent to his interview, however, Chris explained how sharing his struggles with the researcher and feeling supported and understood in their conversation had been both beneficial and rewarding. Chris remarked how the interview had "absolutely" and "a hundred percent" positively impacted his perception of topics discussed, going on to state:

I think this is really all I needed ... I feel like going into this week I'm going to be able to, I don't know, kind of think about [the challenges] less. Just knowing that there's other people that are going through it helps. I can't thank you [enough] for just like letting me process through. So, thanks for just having an ear.

Here Chris demonstrated the value of a highly interactive interview process, one in which the participant is not solely providing requested information but also receiving affirmation and support via their connection with the researcher.

Because CITs responded in this way, future directions for this and related work may benefit from recognizing how intentionally broad, reflective activities which promote interpersonal contact and dynamic dialogue around programmatic experiences may support the continued development of recent trainees. Counselor development is meant to be without end; the constant evolution of one's professional identity is thought to be in continuous interaction with the constant evolution of one's personal identity over the span of a lifetime, making the

process of integrating the two perpetual and necessitating attention and care. This premise of integration appeared to be nowhere as confounding and essential as when CITs neared the conclusion of their program, creating a sort of “sweet spot” for the execution of such reflective retrospection.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate and further understand the experience of the impact/influence of counseling training upon interpersonal relationships of CITs in order to contribute to limited body of knowledge regarding this topic. Through an IPA methodology exploring the experience of seven CITs, this study unearthed three superordinate themes: confusion and insecurity, growing pains, and overcoming and resilience. These superordinate themes contained sub-themes of professional/personal identity integration, mental health and responsibility, reassurance, relationship imbalances and disequilibrium, loneliness, ruptures and repairs, outright benefits, and self-prioritization. Little research directly addressed the broader impact of counselor training upon students’ interpersonal lives, however participant narratives aligned with existing literature regarding counselor development, personal/professional development, personal/professional identity integration, and personal growth. Further, the repercussions of counselor training as a “kind of butterfly effect” as described by Dahl et al. (2010) where not only the student was changed but in effect their greater social system experiences change was illuminated by participant narratives (p. 3). The implications of this study’s findings suggested counseling programs had an ethical responsibility to acknowledge this wide-reaching phenomenon, providing students with appropriate scaffolding and support in navigating the personal/interpersonal transition initiated by training. This study provided a foundation for understanding the impact of counselor training upon CITs’ interpersonal lives,

allowing for future research to both enhance understanding of this experience and explore strategies to augment student support in addressing change of this nature.

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APPENDIX A  
CONSENT FORM



CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

**Project Title:** An Interpretative Phenomenological Study of How Counselors-in-Training Experience Their Interpersonal Relationships

**Lead Researcher:** Christopher Ward, MA, NCC, LPC  
Doctoral Candidate; Counselor Education and Supervision  
University of Northern Colorado  
christopher.ward@unco.edu

**Research Advisor:** Jennifer L. Murdock Bishop, PhD, LPC, CO-SSP-SC, NCC, ACS  
Professor; Doctoral Program Coordinator--CES  
Applied Psychology and Counselor Education, University of Northern Colorado  
Campus Box 131, Greeley, CO 80639  
(970) 351-2544; Jennifer.Murdock-Bishop@unco.edu

Dear Potential Participant,

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of counseling students. Counselor training is a rigorous academic endeavor which promotes personal and professional development and leads to personal change. The goal of this study is to gain more information and a greater understanding of how this personal change influences students' interpersonal relationships.

My hope is by exploring counseling students' interpersonal relationship changes related to counselor training, counselor educators, supervisors, and students will better understand this phenomenon. Information generated from this study will support increased awareness for students and counselor educators of interpersonal relationship change during the course of counselor training. This enhanced understanding provided through your training experiences will help counseling students be better prepared for the impact of counselor training and assist counselor educators in supporting their students.

As a participant in this research, you will engage in an initial Zoom interview and a follow-up interview in whatever format is comfortable or convenient (e.g., Zoom, phone call, etc.) to confirm my understanding of your responses, respond to follow up questions, and explore any additional areas of interest that have emerged through the course of interviewing other participants. Interviews will be audio-recorded to ensure that your views are represented accurately. You will also be provided with a list of tentative themes drawn from your responses to gauge your agreement with the conclusions drawn from the interviews and analysis. The interviews will occur at an arranged time that is convenient for you and each should take approximately 60 (likely less for the follow-up interview).

To gather demographic data for the study, you will be asked how you identify with regard to affectional orientation, gender identity, race/ethnicity, and any additional identities which feel relevant. You will also be asked to provide your age, relationship/marital status, counselor education program title, placement in program (i.e., semesters completed/remaining), and any counseling experience prior to counselor education training

You will choose a pseudonym (a fake name) before the interview. All audio recordings will be transcribed by the researcher. Transcript data will only be available to the researcher, a co-coder who will help distill data into themes, a research auditor, and my research advisor. However, pseudonyms will be used in the raw transcript data, so only the researcher will know participant identities. Any quotes or information from the interview used in the final report will reference only the pseudonym and/or demographic data, with all identifying information removed. Any information collected as part of this research will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

During the research process, all hard data will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the care of the researcher. Upon completion of the research, the faculty advisor will store all data in a locked file cabinet. Electronic data will be stored on a password protected computer. All audio files, written transcriptions, and consent forms will be destroyed after five years. I do not foresee any risk to any participants as a result of participation in this study, however, someone could potentially find aspects of your experience familiar and through your story infer your identity, although your identity will not be revealed or confirmed to anyone by the researcher. There is also the possibility that any research related information I send to you (e.g. a copy of this form with your signature) could be opened/seen by an individual other than you. For these reasons, though the researcher will take careful steps to maintain confidentiality, participant anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

Some interview questions do pertain to personal matters and may evoke memories and thoughts that are sensitive and/or associated with strong emotions; please know that you can stop at any time or ask any questions that you have. Upon completion of the interview process, you will be provided with an opportunity to debrief, ask any additional questions, and learn more about the nature and purpose of the study. Resources will be provided for any aftercare that you feel is necessary and appropriate following participation in the study.

Please retain a copy of this form for your records and feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns. Thank you for assisting me with this important research.

Sincerely,

Christopher Ward, MA, LPC, NCC

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1910.

I am willing to participate in an individual interview. I give consent for the researcher to contact me about scheduling a potential time for an individual interview.

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Participant Signature

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Date

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Researcher Signature

---

Date

APPENDIX B

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS & PROTOCOL

## INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS & PROTOCOL

Interviews will be scheduled at least one week in advance. Prior to the interview, the researcher will review the consent forms with the participant. Participants will be informed that participation is at will, involvement can be concluded at any time, and declining to answer questions is permitted. Participants will be informed through their consent that these interviews will be recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants will be informed of researcher protocols in place to maintain participant confidentiality.

**Interview:** Provided below are examples of the open-ended questions that will be asked during the interview. As the interview precedes, the conversation may address additional components dependent upon what each participant feels is relevant to the expression of their individual experience.

### Main Interview Questions:

1. Please just consider your answer. You do not need to respond out loud at this time. Think of the time when you were first entering your graduate program. Think about who was important to you, interpersonally. Now focus on your relationship with one specific person whom you knew prior to and then during your program. This relationship can be with a friend, family member, significant other, mentor, etc. Now that you have that person in mind, let's continue.
2. Describe your relationship with that person before you entered your graduate program.
  - a. What was most important to you about that relationship?
  - b. Did you receive support from this individual? Please describe evidence of supportive interactions.
3. Describe your process of developing a "counselor identity" during the beginning of your graduate program. (Milestones? Classmate interaction?)
4. Now describe the relationship after you entered your program. How did this relationship change, if at all?
  - a. Do you think your developing counselor identity impacted this relationship? If so, what elements impacted this perceived change?
  - b. Do you feel connected to this person today? Has this changed over time? If so, what elements impacted this perceived change?
5. If you could go back in time and give yourself advice in navigating relationship changes that may have resulted from entering a program like yours, what would that advice be?

6. What can faculty do to support students in the training process regarding interpersonal relationships?
7. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your relationship specifically or this topic in general?

APPENDIX C  
DEMOGRAPHICS QUESTIONNAIRE



## DEMOGRAPHICS QUESTIONNAIRE

Please complete this form to the extent that you feel comfortable. Please use your own words to describe your identities. You can choose to leave anything blank that you do not feel comfortable answering.

First name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender identity: \_\_\_\_\_

Pronouns: \_\_\_\_\_

Racial and ethnic identity/identities: \_\_\_\_\_

Sexual/affectional/romantic identity/identities: \_\_\_\_\_

A pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

Marital/relationship Status: \_\_\_\_\_

Educational program: \_\_\_\_\_

What is the best way to contact you in the future? (The researchers might reach out to you to inquire about your impressions of identified themes that have emerged from the data.)

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(Optional) Please tell us anything about your intersection of identities that you would like us to know about you. What makes you unique that would ordinarily be missed in a standard demographic questionnaire? Feel free to write as much or as little as you would like.

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APPENDIX D  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



Date: 06/07/2021

Principal Investigator: Christopher Ward

Committee Action: **IRB EXEMPT DETERMINATION – New Protocol**

Action Date: 06/07/2021

Protocol Number: 2105026867

Protocol Title: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study of How Counselors-in-Training Experience their Interpersonal Relationships

Expiration Date:

The University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol and determined your project to be exempt under 45 CFR 46.104(d)(7)(2) for research involving

Category 2 (2018): EDUCATIONAL TESTS, SURVEYS, INTERVIEWS, OR OBSERVATIONS OF PUBLIC BEHAVIOR. Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: (i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 45 CFR 46.111(a)(7).

You may begin conducting your research as outlined in your protocol. Your study does not require further review from the IRB, unless changes need to be made to your approved protocol.

**As the Principal Investigator (PI), you are still responsible for contacting the UNC IRB office if and when:**



- You wish to deviate from the described protocol and would like to formally submit a modification request. Prior IRB approval must be obtained before any changes can be implemented (except to eliminate an immediate hazard to research participants).
- You make changes to the research personnel working on this study (add or drop research staff on this protocol).
- At the end of the study or before you leave The University of Northern Colorado and are no longer a student or employee, to request your protocol be closed. \*You cannot continue to reference UNC on any documents (including the informed consent form) or conduct the study under the auspices of UNC if you are no longer a student/employee of this university.
- You have received or have been made aware of any complaints, problems, or adverse events that are related or possibly related to participation in the research.

If you have any questions, please contact the Research Compliance Manager, Nicole Morse, at 970-351-1910 or via e-mail at [nicole.morse@unco.edu](mailto:nicole.morse@unco.edu). Additional information concerning the requirements for the protection of human subjects may be found at the Office of Human Research Protection website - <http://hhs.gov/ohrp/> and <https://www.unco.edu/research/research-integrity-and-compliance/institutional-review-board/>.

Sincerely,

Nicole Morse  
Research Compliance Manager

University of Northern Colorado: FWA00000784

APPENDIX E

MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES PROVIDED TO PARTICIPANTS

## Counseling Resources

- National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC)
  - can look up counselors and therapists in your area
  - <https://www.nbcc.org/search/counselorfind>
- Psychology Today
  - can look up counselors and therapists in your area
  - <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists>
- Summitstone Health Partners- Fort Collins
  - Counselors and Therapists
  - <https://www.summitstonehealth.org>
  - Have a walk-in clinic and 24/7 crisis line: [970.494.4200](tel:970.494.4200)
- The Parent-Child Interaction Center & Canopy Counseling- Fort Collins+Boulder
  - Counseling for all ages
  - 970-472-1207
- Heart Centered Counseling- Fort Collins, Loveland, Greeley
  - Counseling for all ages
  - 970-779-4536
- North Range Behavioral Health- Greeley/ Weld County
  - Counseling for all ages
  - Have a walk in clinic and 24/7 crisis line
  - Call-844-493-8255 for crisis line
  - Call 970-347-2120 to make an appointment
- Jefferson Center for Mental Health – Denver/ Jefferson County
  - All types of counseling
  - Crisis center and walk-ins
  - 303-425-0300
- Cedar Springs Behavioral Health- El Paso County/ Colorado Springs
  - All counseling services
  - Crisis line and walk-n
  - 888-456-0968

## Crisis Lines

- **Suicide hotline:** 1-800-273-8255
- **Crisis/Suicide Text number:** Text 'Talk' to 38255

**Apps to help**

- Calm Harm
- Headspace