MURDOCH RESEARCH REPOSITORY

http://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/29776/

The effects of CPE on primary relationships – is it worth exploring?

Karin Strehlow, PhD
Lecturer
Centre of University Teaching and Learning
Murdoch University
Murdoch, Western Australia

Rev. John Hewitson
Coordinator Pastoral Care Services
Centre Director CPE
Royal Perth Hospital
Perth, Western Australia

Correspondence may be sent to; Karin Strehlow, email: k.strehlow@murdoch.edu.au

Abstract

Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) can be a life transforming experience for students, but does it also transform students' primary relationships? An online survey of past CPE students at Royal Perth Hospital, Western Australia, found that overall CPE had a positive effect on primary relations in key areas, in particular communication, intimacy and spirituality. Recent relationships were more negatively affected. Some relationships did not survive CPE. Structural and pedagogical implications require further research.

Introduction

In 1994, ACPE News published a one-page summary of Rev. McLocklin's study "CPE Effects on marital relationships." Based on interviews of 15 CPE students and their spouses, the study concluded that while Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) disrupted the equilibrium in marital systems, altered verbal communication in the relationship, changed the experience of conflict and influenced the relationship as a result of arising "shifting perspectives", none of these effects could be defined as either positive or negative. Rather, the article argued that "the effects identified in the study [were] interrelated in the disruption of homeostatic stability in the marital relationship system" (Mc Locklin, 1994, p. 5). To date, this appears to be the only study exploring the effects of CPE on students' relationships, which is surprising, given that CPE seeks to enhance the student's ability to relate to "the other", more specifically, the person for whom they are pastorally caring (RPH, 2014, p. 9; ACPEWA Inc, 2013, p. 9-10). Moreover, the CPE process can be highly stressful,

with activities such as open groups, verbatims and role plays that are designed to challenge students' assumptions around their identity and values and their perception of reality. It might, therefore, be a reasonable assumption that in the transformative alchemical process of CPE there may be others who are caught in the fire.

As CPE supervisors we become facilitators who help "students become active participants in their learning and make meaningful connections between prior knowledge, new knowledge and the processes involved in learning. The role of students from this perspective is to construct their own understandings and capabilities in carrying out challenging tasks" (Copley, 1992, p.681). Logan (2006) comments that the written verbatim (the writing down of the remembered pastoral encounter for the goal of improving the student's care of the other) that forms the foundation for learning is for many CPE students experienced as a "Baptism of Fire":

> "The purpose, then, of the reflection is to begin the process of identifying the attitudes, values and assumptions which undergird the pastoral care acts and to be curious about how all of these impact the ministry to the other person... The process of reflection on the pastoral encounters is an essential part of the learning process because it results in the student beginning to make sense of and meaning of the experience…" (Logan, 2006, p. 6).

In short, CPE aims to increase what Anderson (2004) refers to as "spiritual/cultural competency (that) integrates elements of self-awareness, understanding and interactive skill", which ultimately leads to transformation of the participants and their pastoral praxis.

In many ways the CPE experience is a distillation of the adult education action-reflection model (e.g. Kolb, 1984). It utilises:
- the rational process of reflection on praxis (Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006);
- knowledge development through lectures, tutorials and seminars;
- CPE's concern with meaning making (Dirkx et al., 2006) and
- individual and group supervision within the context of the peer "community of learning" and the wider context of the learning community that informs the CPE participant's learning.

The combination of group supervision (between 80-90 hours per unit) and Individual supervision (8-10 hours per unit) contributes significantly to the potential for the student's transformation. Holton (2010) uses the phrase 'Wisdom Supervision' referring to supervision that:

> "…can engender transformative learning in the struggle to construct a self identity and a meaningful worldview [whereby] through wise conversation and creative attentiveness, individuals and groups can co-create a deeper perspective and wisdom that can lead to transformation and effective practice" (Holton, 2010, p. 6).

"Meaning-making" is an essential focus for the process of CPE for both the students and the people they are engaging with and through this for the supervisor. In the midst of crisis or radical change people (of whatever philosophical, spiritual or faith heritage) seek to make sense of what is happening for them in order to inform their actions. This often evokes critical experiences within this person which forms the basis of transformation of pastoral practice and self understanding.

The process of transformative education is both reflective and rational to make meaning at the integrative and conceptual domains:

> "Transformation learning enables individuals to shift gear into another way of perceiving. Part of the process in transformational learning is the evaluation of old mind-sets and mental maps. With transformational learning comes a new way of perceiving ..... It thinks more systemically and allows individuals to connect more to the bigger picture" (Carroll, 2010, p. 4).

Thus, it is inevitable that as students become transformed, their relations also become transformed. For some students, the first CPE unit can be truly life changing. CPE supervisor Soomee Kim (2012), for example, wrote of her experience:

> "In 2000, I completed my first Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) unit. The experience left an indelible impression on me. I began a deep inward look at myself (centroversion), listening more to my emotions and instincts. I realized I had barely touched the tip of an immense reservoir of energy within myself. I was discovering who I really am, and of what I was, and now am, really made. The discovery led to an honest look into the "irreconcilable differences" and the courage to end a marriage of 27 years" (Kim, 2012, p. 283).

While for Soomee Kim the breakup of her marriage was a positive event, this may not be necessarily evident to those on the outside, who can only see that this person completed a CPE unit and as a consequence ended her marriage. In fact, this was exactly the reason given to one of the authors by two people for why they did not want to undertake a CPE unit. Both cited knowing of, or hearing about someone who had completed a CPE unit and whose marriage had ended as a result of this. Both focused on what they perceived as the "terrible" dissolution of the marriage and the "painful" and "distressing" consequences to the family and wider community.

These comments are concerning for the CPE community. For many students seeking ordination within religious communities and people seeking employment in other areas, CPE is a required component of their training or accreditation. Many tertiary institutions have agreements with CPE centres giving credits for CPE units and/or certification. Consequently, these CPE centres need to function to the same academic standards and legal requirements as the partner institutions. By implication, CPE centres are to provide support structures for the students to facilitate them working through emergent issues, thus minimising negative consequences.

To date we only have anecdotal evidence that CPE does affect students' intimate relationships, however there is no data available to either support or negate this claim. At a minimum, what needs to be determined is whether there is any basis for the claim that CPE does affect primary relationships. More importantly, is this really an issue for CPE, CPE pedagogy and CPE students?

This pilot study sought to initiate the exploration into this topic. The aim was to investigate the effects of CPE as presented at Royal Perth Hospital, Western Australia, on students' primary intimate relationships.

Methods

Participants

Participation in this study was limited to persons who had completed a CPE unit at Royal Perth Hospital, Western Australia during the period 2009/2010 – Spring 2012; who were 18 years or older; and who were in a primary intimate relationship (marriage, de-facto, intentional, informal or other). An intimate relationship may or may not include a sexual expression. We defined "intentional" relationship as one based on a common ideal (e.g. a religious community). "Informal" relationships were defined as those where a strong bond/close friendship exists with people with whom one has daily contact.

A total of 78 persons (23 male, 55 female) were invited to take part in this study; 32 persons agreed to participate, however, two failed to fill in the survey, reducing the sample for analysis to 30 (8 male, 22 female). Of those, one participant (3.3%) was in the 21-30 age bracket and another (3.3%) in the 31-40 category. Eleven participants (36.7%) were each in the 41-50 and 51-60 class group. Four participants (13.3%) were between 61-70 years and two (6.6%) were over 70 years of age. Half of the participants had completed a full-time and the other half a part-time CPE.

Royal Perth Hospital CPE setting

Royal Perth Hospital (RPH) is a tertiary teaching hospital in Perth, Western Australia. Together with Bentley Health Service, a major provider of mental health services and Aged Care rehabilitation, and Shenton Park, the State Rehabilitation Centre, they form the Royal Perth Group (RPG) comprising approximately 1,050 beds. CPE is offered as a fulltime intensive or part-time unit. Each unit consists of 90 hours group work, 10 hours individual supervision, 100-125 hours of face-to-face ministry and 175-200 hours for reflection, writing up material, preparation for didactics etc. This gives a total of 400 hours. Those who engage in a full time unit have their placements within the Royal Perth Group. Part Time Participants choose their own placements, which have been in areas as diverse as Nursing, Community (parish) ministry, Aged Care, Prisons, Allied Health, Education and others. Educational contexts have included Primary, Secondary and Tertiary education, whether as teachers, lecturers, chaplains and/or in leadership positions.

CPE focuses on the Individual and the "Individual in relationship" and at RPH it is recognised that students engage in a wider "learning community". This "Learning Community" has five core elements three of which exist independent of CPE students. These three elements are 1) the accreditation relationships (Local CPE Association and contextual organisation, Royal Perth Hospital Group); 2) Placement relationships; as the pastoral care team members functioning as placement coordinators already work in the context, and 3) the supervisory environment. The two core elements that are student/intern dependent are the Intern and the community of learning, which consists of the peers, the primary other and, in part-time units at RPH, a student's Pastoral Support Group (RPH, 2013, p. 10). This research focuses on the student's relationship with her/his primary intimate relationship or community.

Procedure

4

This retrospective pilot study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Royal Perth Hospital (Ethics Approval # EC2012/143) and Murdoch University (Ethics Approval # 2012/169).

An online survey was created and managed by the Educational Development Unit at Murdoch University. The Administrator of the Pastoral Care Department at Royal Perth Hospital identified potential candidates and invited them via email to take part in this study. If emails could not be delivered, the person was mailed a letter. Participants were given four weeks to fill in the survey. After three weeks, the administrator sent out a reminder email.

The online survey used in this study consisted of two parts. Part A comprised a series of background questions including CPE mode (Full-time/part-time), the type (heterosexual, same sex, other) and nature (marriage, de-facto, informal, intentional) of their relationship; the length of their relationship (< 5 years; 6-10 years; 10-19 years; 20-30 years; > 30 years); their gender (M/F/other) and age (21-30; 31-40; 41-50; 51-60; 61-70; > 70). In part B participants were asked to rate how CPE had affected their primary relations in terms of communication, experience of intimacy and companionship, conflict management, shared goals, finance and spirituality. Ratings were based on a Likert scale ranging from -5 major negative impact to +5 major positive impact. In addition to scoring the effects, participants were given the opportunity to make comments.

Once the survey had been closed, the Educational Development Unit created a summary report with de-identified qualitative comments that were forwarded to the researchers for further analysis. This arrangement ensured the confidentiality of survey participants.

Results

The cohort surveyed was very homogenous in terms of primary relations. Ninety percent of participants were in a heterosexual relationship, 10% identified with the "other" category and no-one was in a same sex relationship. Relationships tended to be traditional, with 86.7% of participants being married, 3.3% in informal and 6.7% in intentional relationships. No-one was in a de-facto relationship although 3.3% of participants provided no response to this question. The majority of CPE students who participated in this study were in stable, long term relationships, with 23.3% having been in that relationship for 10-19 years, 30% 20-30 years and 33.3% above 30 years. Only 6.6% of participants had been in their relationship less than 10 years.

Overall, CPE appeared to have had a predominantly positive effect on students' primary relationships. When asked to score the overall effect CPE on their relations, 76.7% reported a positive effect while only 20% reported a negative effect (Fig. 1). However, the positive effects varied across aspects, with some aspects of the relationship showing greater improvement than others. Communication and conflict management, for example were the two areas identified as having improved the most, with 83.3% of responses being positive. This was followed by spiritually (80% positive); shared goals (76.7% positive); experience of intimacy (66.7% positive); and finance (53.3% positive) (Fig. 1).
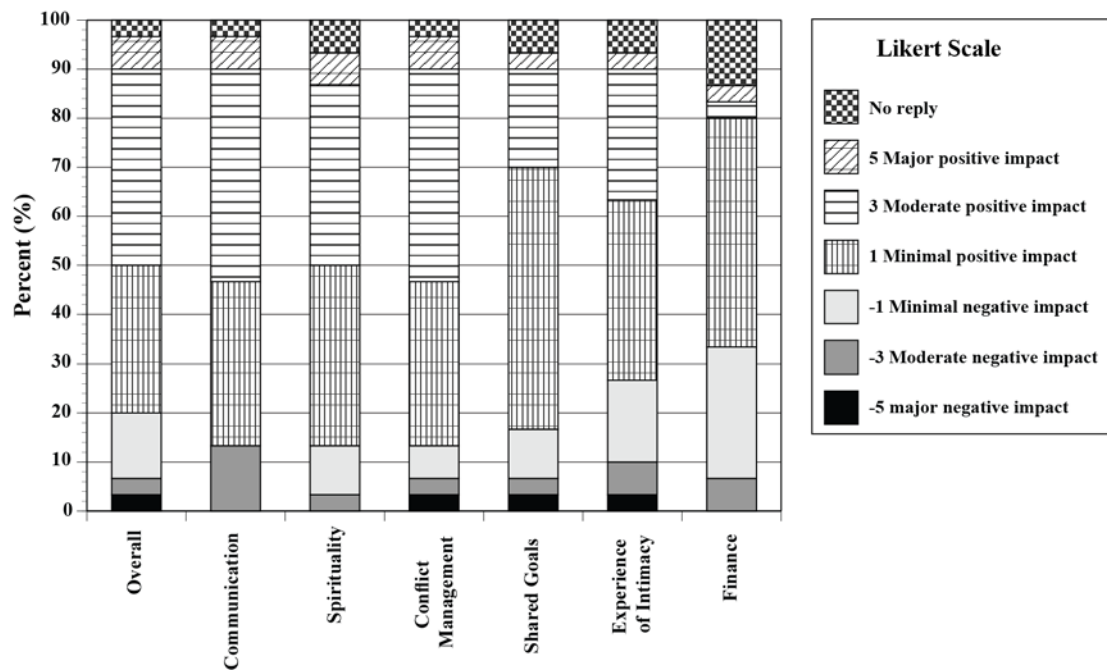
Figure 1: Perceived effects of CPE on various aspects of students' primary relationships.

Undertaking a CPE unit resulted in financial stresses for 33.3% of participants, although no-one reported these to be major negative effects. In fact, major negative effects (-5) were only reported for conflict management, experience of intimacy and shared goals.

The comments provided by participants were not only consistent with those from the Likert scores, but provided more detailed information. Fifty percent claimed that CPE had had a positive effect on their relationship. One participant wrote:

> "With me undergoing the CPE program and my wife being exposed to it through me, helped us to be more understanding of each other and other people. I would say that we definitely both benefited from CPE and we have both grown because of it."

For 10% of the respondents, the effects had been both positive and negative,

> "Time constraints led to less opportunity for companionship. CPE experience led me to become more articulate regarding shared goals and during conflict" and "Being confronted with issues of intimacy, love, friendship, spirituality, sexuality, anger and loss along with opportunities to debrief, explore & role-play spilled over into my home life as it gave me the chance to reflect on my own intimate relationships, mostly in a positive way."

It is worth noting that while this 10% of respondents acknowledged the positive and negative effects on their relationships, when asked to assign a score to the overall effect of CPE, they all chose a positive overall effect.

Positive effects of CPE on the relationship sometimes only occurred after the CPE unit has been completed. One responded reflected:

> "Throughout CPE I was feeling tired, vulnerable, and needy. This put a strain on our relationship. We had a newborn at the time, this also escalated the situation. The positive outcome of the negative situation was months after CPE we were able to work on some of the issues that had occurred."

Improved communication was a recurring theme in over half of the comments. This occurred through the simple sharing of what was happening during CPE. One participant wrote:

> "We talked a lot about what I was learning about myself and our relationship. Every day I was gaining insight into how I related to other people and this enriched my communication with my husband. We were better able to understand each others goals and why we sometimes come into conflict."

CPE also brought up issues within students' relationship that were then discussed. "CPE brought up many issues, some of which were springboards for discussion and communication between my husband and myself." CPE also seemed to have provided them with the vocabulary to address these issues, as one respondent wrote: "CPE gave us a ???language??? to discuss sensitive topics". However, for many participants, it was their ability to listen that improved their communication. I "listened more and said less" was one example of this.

For many, the beneficial effects from CPE arose through the working together and supporting each other during the stressful CPE times. "Working together to achieve my goals in CPE brought us closer to each other, and, in our understanding of each other."

Financial issues arising from the cost of the CPE unit and for many, loss of income, added considerable strain to some relationships.

> "The financial cost of not bringing in income while on CPE was difficult- probably more about my sense of not doing my fair share rather from my partner's attitude. Having said this, it did mean some belt-tightening & extra stress during that time."

Unfortunately, CPE did not enhance all relationships, as one past student shared:

> "I am no longer in the relationship (marriage) I was in when I undertook CPE. The CPE course opened up various past experiences that my then partner could not accept and decided to leave the marriage relationship."

Unlike Kim (2012) we are unable to ascertain whether the ending of the marriage was a positive or negative outcome for this student.

Finally, for some, CPE had no effect on their relationship owing to their own level of maturity,

> *"My partner and I have done a lot of inner spiritual and psychological work individually and as a couple over many years. [M]y partner fully supported me as I engaged in CPE and was a constant companion for me as always in listening deeply and supporting me as needed through the program. CPE really didn't change our relationship in any real way."*

or due to their understanding of CPE, or the influence of Professional Development on their personal and relational understanding:

> "Zero impact in all categories which I note is not an option on this survey. … Doing CPE is a professional requirement and as a professional it is important for me to for such activities not to impact my personal life in any way whatsoever (maybe apart from the fatigue in holding down two jobs while doing the course) I am not even sure what in this course would impact on these categories anyway."

Discussion

Does CPE affect students' primary relationships? Our findings appear to suggest that this may indeed be the case, with participants in this pilot study reporting that CPE had affected their relationships. This is not surprising, as students undertaking CPE are likely to experience the same stressors as students returning to education, especially non-traditional students.

Conflicting demands imposed by employment, family, personal lives and studies lead to high stress levels among tertiary students. Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, (2006) found that 50% of the students in their research, experienced stress related problems. It is not uncommon for these to spill across onto family life, affecting it negatively (e.g. Scheinkman, 1988; Kirby, Biever, Martinez, Gomez, 2004; Gold, 2006). That the lack of time for family, lifestyle modification, communication and finance are main sources of distress, is documented both in the literature (Kirby, et al., 2004; Gold, 2006; Hyun, 2009) and by our students. Finance in particular, posed a problem for a large percentage of respondents. For many, participation in CPE involved a loss of income and therefore "belt tightening". However, despite high stress levels, most students claimed that, overall CPE had had a positive effect on their relationships. One possible explanation for this may be the nature of our student cohort, which consisted of predominantly middle aged (and older) females in long-term marriages.

While female students tend to be affected more by stress than males (e.g. Dusselier, Dunn, Wang, Shelley II, & Whaleen, 2005), older students generally report lower stress levels than younger ones (Kirby et al., 2004). Moreover, people in long-term mature relationships appear to be better equipped to deal with study related stress (Scheinkman, 1988). Thus, our student cohort, by its very nature, was more resilient to the negative effects of CPE-induced stress on their marriages. The question arises whether the same results would have been obtained with a younger cohort of students. In this study, it was the younger participants who reported the highest levels of marital/relational discord. Clearly it is the younger students who were the most affected. Unfortunately, the number of younger participants was small and in the absence of other research in this area, it is nearly impossible to determine the true extent of this issue.

Certainly, in the higher education sector, the need to cater for the welfare of married students and their families is increasingly being acknowledged. Measures recommended to reduce marital distress in students include: a) inviting partners to information sessions which also cover topics such as anticipated problems and advice on coping strategies; b) sponsoring social events for families; c) creating peer-

mentoring programmes for students and their spouses; d) creating volunteer support groups; e) providing counselling services (e.g. Brannock, Litten, & Smith, 2000; Kirby et al., 2004; Wormus, 2009).

The intent of these measures is to establish support networks and strengthen familial support for students. Comments provided by our students indicated that the support of their partners was vital to many of them.

> "I found that I was more than fully employed on my full time CPE unit and was extremely reliant on my husband to pick up the running of house and family. It was very stressful, yet our problem solving and communication improved."

The importance of familial support in reducing stress in students is well recognised (e.g. Kirby et al., 2004) and this may be a factor that CPE supervisors and centres may need to consider. It may be argued that our emphasis has been on the student rather than the students' relationships. The selection process of prospective CPE candidates for example is rigorous. The supervisor needs to assess the person's ability to self-disclose, and the person's personal, philosophical and emotional capacity to engage with potential transformation of meaning framework and self understanding (RPH, 2014, p. 105). Persons with recent traumas (within last 12-24 months) are usually, though not necessarily, excluded from entering into the programme (RPH, 2014). Yet, is this enough and are the selection criteria based on a limited concept of individuality?

Limitations

As in other research, this pilot study had several limitations. We used a retrospective design even though this would not allow us to compare against an actual baseline (e.g. state of a relationship before and after CPE). We chose not to use any of the existing instruments to measure marital satisfaction, nor did we interview the participants or their partners. Doing so would have produced more reliable information. As the study was limited to one CPE Centre only, the number of participants was also very small. Yet despite these limitations we decided to proceed, as this was a fact finding exercise to determine whether this topic was really worth exploring.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations of our small pilot study, our findings suggest that CPE affects primary relationships. In addition, this study raised a number of questions, for example, who are we as CPE supervisors responsible for? Does our duty of care extend to families? If we were to implement some of the recommendations made to reduce student stress, how will we know if they are successful? Can we modify our pedagogical approach to reduce student stress without compromising transformation? Is there something that can be done to reduce financial stress? This may attract younger persons into the programme or encourage them to consider becoming supervisors. How does CPE affect marriages? Are the effects different for those undertaking their 1st, 2nd or 3rd CPE unit? Do student perceptions about the effects of CPE on their relationships change over time? From a transformative education perspective, is there something about CPE that makes its impact on its students' relationships greater than or different from other educational programs which also work within the transformational framework?

However, our findings and the new questions that have arisen from it, did not answer our original question. Is this topic worth exploring? Should we engage in a larger scale study? The methodology and outcomes of the pilot study were presented for peer review at the annual ANZACPE conference, 2013. The conference members validated the worth of the research, its focus and preliminary outcomes. We await further feedback and responses to our invitation to the possibility of an ongoing multi centre expanded research project. What started as a simple quest to satisfy a curiosity has turned into an invitation for further research.

References

ACPEWA Inc. (2013). *Standards for CPE Centres in Western Australia*, pp. 13.

Anderson, R.G. (2004). The Search for Spiritual/Cultural Competency in Chaplaincy Practice: Five Steps that Mark the Path, *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy, 13(2),* 1-24.

Brannock, R. G., Litten, M. J., & Smith, J. (2000). The impact of doctoral study on marital satisfaction. *Journal of College Counseling, 3,* 123-130.

Carroll, M. (2010). Supervision: Critical reflection for transformational learning (part 2). *The Clinical Supervisor*, *29*, 1-19.

Copley, J. (1992). The Integration of Teacher Education and Technology: a constructivist model, in D. Carey, D. Willis, and J. Willis (eds.) *Technology and Teacher Education,* Charlottesville, VA:AACE

Dirkx, J. M., Mezirow, J. & Cranton, P. (2006). Musings and reflections on the meaning, context, and process of transformative learning: A dialogue between, John M. Dirkx and Jack Mezirow. *Journal of Transformative Education, 4,* 123-139.

Dusselier, L., Dunn, B., Wang, Y., Shelley II, M. C., & Whaleen, D. F. (2005). Personal, health, academic, and environmental predictors of stress for residence hall students. *Journal of American College Health, 54(1)*, 15-24.

Gold, J. M. (2006). Exploring marital satisfaction among graduate students: implications for service delivery. *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families, 14(4),* 417-419. Doi:10.1177/1066480706290979.

Holton, G. (2010). Wisdom's Garden: A metaphor for Cross-Professional Supervision Training. In M. Benefiel, & G. Holton (Eds.), *The Soul of Supervision. Integrating practice and theory (p.6)*. USA: Morehouse Publishing.

Hyun, J. (2009). An exploration of the coping strategies in female counselling doctoral students' marriages. *Counseling and Psychological Services Dissertation*, Paper 37.

Hyun, J. K., Quinn, B., Madon, T., & Lustig, S. (2006). Graduate student mental health: needs assessment and utilization of counselling services. *Journal of College Student Development 47(3)*, 247-266.

Kim, S. (2012). The art of pastoral supervision: Widening perspectives, narrowing gaps, deepening hearts. *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry, 32*, 282-306.

Kirby, P. G., Biever, J. L., Martinez, I. G., Gomez, J. P. (2004). Adults returning to school: The impact on family and work. *The Journal of Psychology, 138(1),* 65-76.

Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Logan C. J. (2006). Baptism by fire in clinical pastoral education: the theory and practice of learning the art of pastoral care through verbatims, *Reflective Practice: International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives, 7 (1),* 125-142.

McLocklin, S. (1994). CPE effects on marital relationships. *ACPE News,* May/June,5

Royal Perth Hospital (RPH) WA. (2004). *CPE Intern Manual*, p. 108.

Wormus, K. (2009). Considering students with families in higher education. *Journal of Student Affairs, XVIII*, 19-26.