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## Exploring Internship Experiences of Counselors-in-Training through Pinterest: A Consensual Analysis

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## Exploring Internship Experiences of Counselors-in-Training through Pinterest: A Consensual Analysis

### Abstract

Field placements are one component of essentially all counselor education programs. However, little is known about the lived experiences of counselors-in-training enrolled in internship. Over the course of a semester, students enrolled in internship submitted images and comment to an on-line pinboard (Pinterest) to describe their weekly field placement experiences. Consensual qualitative research was utilized in this study to analyze the submissions and to better understand counseling students' experiences during internship. Findings are presented and implications for counselor educators are discussed.

### Keywords

counselor education, field placement, supervision, wellness

Field placement courses such as practicum and internship provide opportunities for counselors-in-training to engage in experiences that strengthen their skills and techniques (Mansor & Wan Yusoff, 2013). Students refine their conceptualization of client issues, challenge personal anxieties, and crystallize their identity as professional counselors. Furr and Carroll (2003) referred to these experiences as “critical incidents” because they play a significant role in counselor development. Internship provides ample opportunities for these critical incidents to occur. As a result, it is advantageous for counselor educators to understand the perceptions and experiences of students enrolled in field placement courses. Counselor educators must help their students process these experiences to facilitate insight and growth that lead to effective counseling practice.

Literature explaining the emotional, cognitive, and identity development of counselors-in-training is substantial (Lambie & Sias, 2009; Nelson & Johnson, 1999; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987; Woodside, Oberman, Cole, & Carruth, 2007). Students begin to undergo developmental processes upon entrance to a counselor education program and continue through field experience. Studying first-semester counseling students, Wagner and Hill (2015) found experiences of counselors-in-training included anticipation, evolving identity, growth and learning, coping, a trusting of the process, and interacting with feedback. Shuler and Keller-Dupree (2015) noted that guided or directed experiential activities can facilitate development of counselors-in-training. Students at various stages in a counselor education program experienced a greater sense of awareness related to challenges, the need for change, the power of group work, and better understood the role of expressive activities in counseling.

In an investigation of the practicum experience, Howard, Inman, and Altman (2006), found 157 critical incidents noted in the journals of nine counselors-in-training. These experiences

were categorized as professional identity, personal reactions, competence, supervision, and philosophy of counseling. One third of the documented experiences related to professional identity and the students' struggle to place themselves in the defined role of helper. More recently, Gibson, Dollarhide, and Moss (2010) confirmed this struggle in a study of professional identity development. Three transformational tasks emerged for counselors-in-training: (a) developing a personal definition of counseling; (b) taking responsibility for professional growth; and (c) finding professional identity within the context of the field. Additionally, Gibson et al. (2010) found differences in levels of autonomy and responsibility related to the development of professional identity for students near the beginning and end of their programs.

Using multiple reflective practices such as journaling, case presentations, and interviews, Mansor and Wan Yusoff (2013) also explored the experiences of students enrolled in practicum. Themes including anxiety, self-efficacy, and task completion emerged. Findings indicated that students lacked confidence in their ability to complete the tasks required of a counselor. Later, Parker (2014) found "peripheral stressors" or stress associated with factors independent of students' direct work with clients led to additional challenges for students. Lack of adequate on-site training and poor rapport with supervisors were key indicators of peripheral stress. In addition to general financial and wellness concerns, field placement procedures requiring students to find and select their own site also contributed to stress. Furr and Carroll (2003) found students in field placements who overcame these barriers and challenges experienced significant positive growth.

As literature and research findings have suggested, students enrolled in counselor education programs encounter a variety of experiences. While most studies explore practicum experiences, less is known about students' experiences during internship. As a result, counselor educators may have limited knowledge of common internship experiences and the struggles

students face during this stage of development. To date, researchers have failed to clearly identify novel strategies that offer students creative opportunities to reflect on and gain insight from their field experiences.

This study explored the experiences of students enrolled in an internship course. During this investigation, counselors-in-training were provided a creative way to compile and reflect upon their field experiences. An online pinboard captured the lived experiences of students throughout their internship semester. Based on available literature, two research questions emerged:

1. What types of experiences do students engage in during internship?
2. What emotions are associated with the internship experience?

Consensual qualitative research (CQR) methodology (Hill, Thompson, & Nutt Williams, 1997) was utilized to develop a theory illustrative of the experiences of counseling students completing counselor education program internships.

### **Method**

After exploring several qualitative traditions in counseling research (e.g., grounded theory and phenomenology), CQR emerged as the preferred methodology for investigating the lived experiences of students enrolled in an internship course. CQR is a rigorous qualitative research methodology influenced by grounded theory, comprehensive process analysis (CPA), and the phenomenology approach (Hill et al., 1997). CQR incorporates the use of research teams, examination of data within and across cases, as well as a distinct process for reaching agreement or consensus (Hill, Thompson, Hess, Knox, Nutt Williams, & Ladany, 2005; Hill et al., 1997). Additionally, CQR encourages the identification and selection of participants from similar groups that have recent experiences with the phenomena under investigation.

The researcher elected to use CQR because of its emphasis on agreement and single, homogenous sources of data. Participants' perceptions and experiences are accentuated through consensual data analysis, which is a goal of CQR (Hays & Wood, 2011). Consensual processes at all stages of analysis minimize the potential for bias. In CQR, researchers consider participants as experts on the topic under investigation, which leads to rich descriptions rather than antithetical numerical representations of experiences. These aspects of CQR were appealing to the researcher. The CQR methodology also offered flexibility when determining a method for data collection (Mao, Deenanath, & Xiong, 2012). Finally, CQR afforded the researcher the opportunity to explore commonalities across participants. As a form of constructivist inquiry, CQR offered a method of consensual investigation necessary to develop a theory that describes the experiences of students enrolled in an internship course.

### **Participants and Procedure**

The participants (n=11) were graduate students enrolled in a clinical mental health counseling (CMHC) internship course in a counselor education program at a small liberal arts university in the southeastern United States. The counseling program was transitioning from Service Agency Counseling (SAC) to CMHC in preparation for an accreditation review by the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2009). Therefore, two students were enrolled in the 48-hour SAC program and nine students were enrolled in the 60-hour CMHC program.

Prior to this semester, all students had participated in a 100-hour practicum experience. The two students enrolled in the SAC program planned to graduate at the end of the semester after completing one 300-hour internship course. Seven students enrolled in the CMHC program were completing a second 300-hour internship course and planned to graduate at the end of the semester.

The two remaining students were enrolled in the CMHC program and were completing the first of two 300-hour internship courses. Eight of the students were female; three students were male. Five students identified as African American; four were White and two identified as American Indian. All participants completed an internship experience at local mental health agencies.

As one of the course requirements, students completed a Pin-Your-Experience assignment. This assignment was developed and implemented for two reasons. Initially, the first author, who served as the course instructor, sought to facilitate a process in which students reflected upon and shared their weekly experiences in a unique and creative way. The first author also anticipated using the data collected from the assignment to better understand the lived experiences of the students participating in internship.

All data were collected through Pinterest (2017). Pinterest (2017) is an on-line pinboard or “bookmarking site” that allows users to easily collect, share, organize, and access images. Participants were granted access to a single Pinterest account. A log-in and password for the account were distributed to all participants. As part of a weekly assignment, participants were asked to respond to a single interview question: “How would you describe your weekly field placement experience?” Participants were instructed to answer this question by reflecting on their field placement experience while utilizing Google Image to search for and select a representative image. Participant posted (i.e., copy and paste) one image in the on-line pinboard each week, with the exception of the first and last weeks of the semester, fall break, and the Thanksgiving break week.

The participants had the option of posting comments in the accompanying text box of each image they posted in Pinterest. Together the selected image and comment described their internship experience each week. With each submission, participants included a pre-determined

unique alphanumerical identifier in the text box. This allowed the researcher to track submissions to the pinboard anonymously. Participants were instructed to refrain from providing identifiable client information when submitting their images and comments.

Participants submitted images with comments weekly for the duration of the internship experience. At the end of the semester, 120 images were accounted for in the online pinboard. The first author copied these images and comments from Pinterest (2017) and pasted them into a Word document. Once all images were housed in a Word document they were deleted from Pinterest (2017) and the account was deactivated. Using the alphanumeric identifiers, the images were organized chronologically by each participant. The first author received approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to carry out all aspects of this study. Additionally, both authors adhered to the ACES and ACA ethical codes throughout the research process.

### **Research Team**

The first author formed a set primary research team to analyze the data collected through Pinterest (2017). The team comprised three female graduate students enrolled in the CMHC program at the university where the study occurred. One team member identified as African-American; the other two members identified as White. The CMHC graduate students, none of whom were participants in the study, served as graduate research assistants for the Professional School Counseling Program and the Clinical Mental Health Counseling Program at the university. The first author trained all team members in CQR as recommended by Hill et al. (1997) and Hill et al. (2005). To supplement the training, team members were provided with examples of studies which implemented CQR as a method for data analysis. Team members were required to read relevant literature related to the CQR methodology (i.e., Hill et al., 1997, Hill et al., 2005). The first author encouraged the members to maintain an egalitarian research team, equally sharing



power and participating in decision-making processes to minimize the potential for biased results. The research team reviewed and analyzed images and comments provided by the participants, developed domains and core ideas, and conducted the cross analysis.

The first author enlisted a local professional school counselor to serve as an external auditor for the study. The professional school counselor was certified by the state's department of public instruction to practice school counseling (k-12) and was a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC). The auditor was female and White. While the auditor was familiar with the CQR procedures, supplemental study materials were provided for review. The auditor's role was to systematically review and provide detailed feedback on the primary team's work (Hill et al., 2005).

### **Data Analysis**

Three primary phases of data analysis are implemented in CQR. These phases include (a) selection of domains; (b) identification of core ideas; and (c) construction of common themes or categories across participants, also known as cross analysis (Hill et al., 2005). An external auditor assisted the research team at each phase of data analysis.

**Selection of domains.** Initially, the primary research team met and reviewed several cases or data subsets disaggregated by participant. Cases included a chronological account of all images and comments submitted by each participant. Consistent with the recommendations of Hill et al. (2005), the team examined the data (images and comments) and established domains based on these cases. Using these domains, members of the research team separately reviewed each case, developing additional domains as necessary. The research team convened and jointly analyzed the data by viewing the images and reading each accompanying comment aloud. One image did not include a comment. However, the team elected to utilize the image because members agreed

its meaning was explicit. Through this process, the team consensually identified core ideas and agreed upon 46 domains.

The auditor thoroughly reviewed the domains established by the research team. Based on the feedback provided by the auditor, the research team met again to reformulate the domains. The research team removed domains that seemed repetitive or assumptive and renamed domains that appeared to inaccurately describe cases. The research team agreed on 20 domains at the conclusion of the second analysis.

A review of the results of the second analysis was conducted by the auditor. The auditor determined further reduction of domains was necessary to clarify and accurately depict the lived experiences of the participants. During this audit, domains the team should consider collapsing within other domains were explicitly identified. For example, the auditor suggested removing the domain “emotional distress” and merging the core ideas with the domain “stress.” The research team met again and based on feedback from the auditor consensually agreed to further refine the domains. Several domains were removed (e.g., emotional distress, relaxation, goals, anticipation, and counseling processes); core ideas were relocated to other representative and appropriately labeled domains. At the conclusion of the third analysis, the research team determined six domains accurately described the data. This process of data analysis aligned with the procedures recommended by Hill et al. (2005).

**Identification of core ideas.** Once the research team and auditor approved the domains, emphasis was placed on abstracting core ideas. Team members reviewed all images and associated comments to identify key ideas exemplary of the domains. The identification of core ideas was consensual in nature and involved a joint effort among team members. Once the initial identification process was complete, the auditor reviewed the results of the analysis and offered

feedback. The research team met again to address the auditor's concerns and ensure the selected core ideas accurately represented the participants' experiences.

**Cross analysis.** All members of the research team participated in the cross-analysis procedures. Using a Word document and the "cut and paste" feature, one team member compiled the core ideas for every domain across all participants, except two, as recommended by Hill et al. (1997). The exclusion of two participants provided the opportunity to conduct a stability check once categories were determined.

In a group effort, the team members reviewed the data to explore possible categories. In a few instances, some of the core ideas were clarified at the participant level. The team agreed that eleven categories most appropriately housed the core ideas. The stability check was conducted once initial categories were established and confirmed the categories were adequate (Hill et al. 2005). The team represented the occurrences of the categories by applying frequency labels. As suggested by Hill et al. (2005), "general" indicated all cases (G; 11 cases), "typical" results specify half of the cases (T; 5 or 6 cases) and "variant" represented a few cases (V; 3 cases). "Rare" was also used to describe the frequency of categories (R; 1 or 2 cases).

Finally, the team considered connections between domains and categories. The data were disaggregated by participant and chronologically re-ordered to explore occurrences and sequences of domains and categories. Consistent with Hill et al. (2005), the team utilized a criterion of 3 cases to identify viable pathways or sequencing of domains and categories. All pathways were consensually agreed upon by the primary research team and the external auditor.

### **Trustworthiness**

Demonstrating trustworthiness and accuracy of data collection, analysis, and findings are the challenges of qualitative investigation (Hill et al., 2005). Throughout the data collection phase

of this study, the first author attempted to bracket or separate preconceived ideas or notions from the observed experiences of students in field placements. The first author had not previously taught a CMHC internship course and was a new faculty member at the university. As a result, the first author had limited knowledge of CMHC students' internship experiences in general and within the specific region. The first author also attempted to bracket any expectations of the assignment that could influence the investigation. The assignment was developed specifically for the internship course and the first author had no basis for determining its potential efficacy in capturing students' field experiences.

Several steps also were taken during data analysis to strengthen the fidelity of the study. For example, data saturation, consensus meetings, dependability audits, and member checking were implemented at various stages of the analysis. As the study continued, the collection of new and relevant information appeared to subside naturally, suggesting data saturation was reached. To ensure domains, core ideas, and categories were dependable, the team regularly participated in consensus meetings. The formal consensus process promoted by Butler and Rothstein (1987) was used during each consensus meeting to promote reliability. In an effort to reduce or remove bias, the authors did not participate in the consensus meetings or any aspect of data analysis. During the consensual meetings, research team members bracketed personal biases and expectations that may have influence data analysis. As suggested by Hill et al. (2005), team members were asked to openly discuss their biases and expectations with each other throughout all phases of data analysis. Dependability audits also were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of this research. The use of an external auditor, rather than an internal auditor, offered a perspective free of influence from the authors or the primary research team, thus further reducing bias (Hill et al. 2005). Finally, "member checking" was employed to further establish trustworthiness.

Participants received a copy of the final draft of the results and were asked to participate in a conference call. The conference call was conducted by the auditor and included four participants who provided feedback consistent with the findings of the study. The second author was not involved in any aspect of the data collection or analysis.

## **Results**

After consensus meetings, dependability audits, stability checks, and member checks were employed, six domains and eleven categories emerged from the data (see Figure 1). The *Self-Care* domain included participants' efforts to maintain balance in their life. The categories in this domain were *Encouragement*, *Rewards*, and *Imagery*. The second domain, *Personal Growth*, encompassed instances when students experienced growth. *Learning* and *Reflection* were categories in this domain. The *Success* domain arose from images and comments related to achievement. *Encouragement* was the single category in this domain. The fourth domain was *Challenges*, which stemmed from general barriers students faced during the internship experience. The *Stress* domain included instances when students were discomforted and emotions were heightened. The categories in this domain were *Field Placement Sites* and *Work/School*. The final domain was *Clinical Experiences*. This domain was described as experiences that occurred during the processes of delivering counseling services. Categories within this domain were *Client Intervention*, *Relationships/Rapport*, *Ethical Practice*, and *Supervision*. An overview of domains, categories, example core ideas, and frequencies are provided in Table 1.

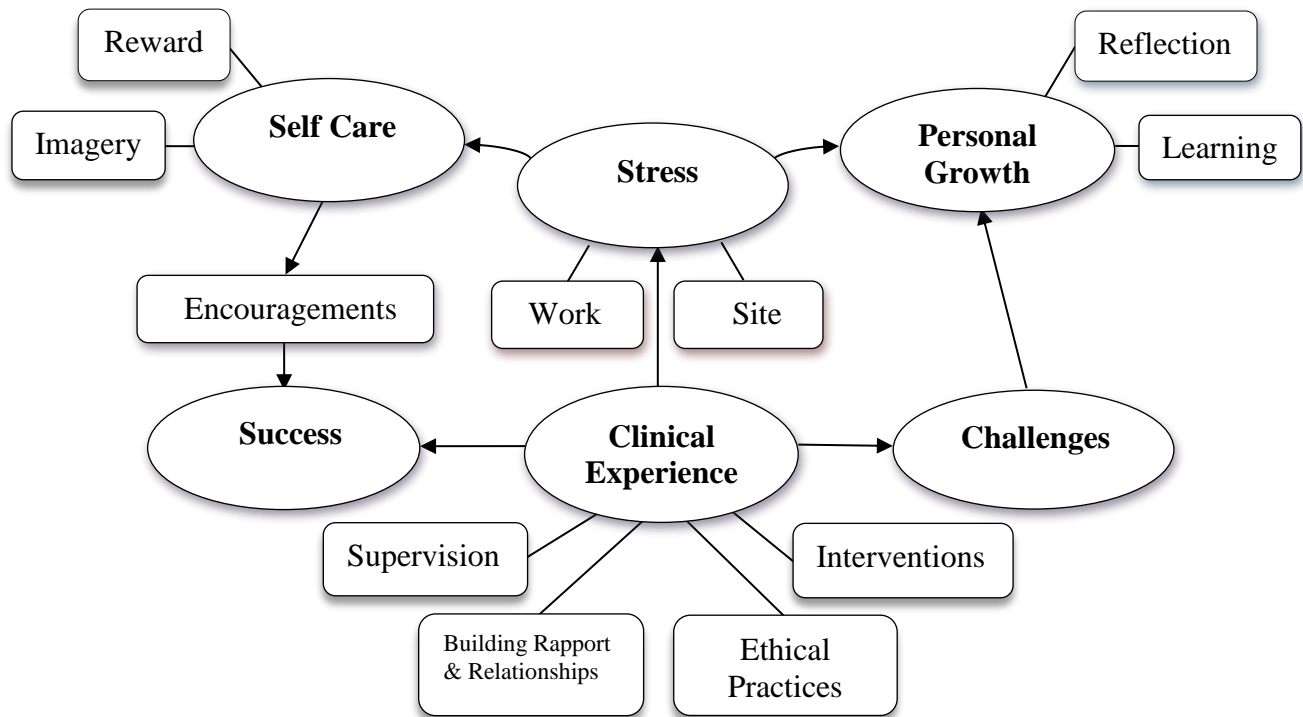


Figure 1. Representation of counseling student experiences during field placement with directional relationships between domains (ovals) and categories (rectangles).

### Self-Care

The analysis revealed participant descriptions of various methods of self-care. Self-care was implemented throughout the internship, although it was most prevalent following stressful experiences. Three categories, encouragement (G), rewards (T), and imagery (V), emerged and clarified the ways participants engaged in self-care.

**Encouragement.** Most participants described ways in which they utilized encouragement as a form of self-care. Representative of encouragement, Participant 8 posted an elegant photograph of Whitney Houston, an American recording artist and actress. Whitney Houston died in the first quarter of the participants' internship semester. The participant appeared to gain encouragement from this tragic event as indicated by the comment, "LIVE LIFE.....with the

mindset that if I treat the body right with the right things (maybe a few bad - no one is perfect)...it will treat me right with GOOD HEALTH & LONGER LIFE.” Similar to Participant 8, other participants took the opportunity to seek encouragement as a way to establish a positive mindset and focus on self-care.

**Rewards.** Of the eleven participants, seven indicated they planned to reward themselves with tangible prizes. For example, Participant 3 submitted an image of a new gray and black hiking backpack purchased as a reward. The comment read, “This is a picture of my new backpack. I am planning a "self-care" camping trip over Spring Break. Backpacking regularly helps keep me relaxed, grounded, and inspired.” Similarly, Participant 5 indicated a vacation was in order, by posting an image of a town and commenting, “Much needed vacation to Kansas.”

**Imagery.** A few participants suggested imagery was used to promote self-care. In these cases, the participants commented on utilizing their imagination, daydreaming, and dreaming. The accompanying images demonstrated the topic of the imagery. For example, Participant 2 suggested the use of imagery by providing an image of a plate of blackberries, blueberries, and strawberries covering a tart with strawberry syrup drizzled over top. The participant included the caption “Gracious and sweet! After a long day at work, a sweet, fruity dessert can be pleasing to the mind.”

Table 1  
 Domains, Categories, Core Idea Examples, and Frequencies of Experiences of Internship Students (N = 11).

Domain/category	Core Idea Examples	Frequency
1. Self-Care		
a) Encouragement	“Take care of self,” positive mindset, empowering statements	General
b) Rewards	Vacation, relaxation, purchases, spending time with nature	Typical
c) Imagery	Dreaming, daydreaming, imagination	Variant
2. Personal Growth		
a) Learning	Developing professional identity, continuing education, coursework	General
b) Reflection	“Life can leave you confused,” hindsight, review of preparation	Typical
3. Success		
a) Encouragement	Personal achievements, client growth, positive affirmations/self-talk	General
4. Challenges	Client situations an struggles, confusion, making choices	
5. Stress		
a) Field placement sites	“Overwhelmed to provide quality care,” burnout, frustration, countertransference	General
b) Work/school	“Feeling stressed from studying and working all day,” unemployment	Typical
6. Clinical Experiences		
a) Client Intervention	Art therapy, EMDR, therapeutic activities, sandtray, crisis counseling	General
b) Relationships/rapport	Establishing relationships, trust, understanding	Typical
c) Ethical practice	Competence, navigating nuanced situations	Variant
d) Supervision	Support, lack of concern, strategies, collaboration	Variant

### Personal Growth

In general, participants experienced a sense of personal growth over the course of the field placement and most notably following stressful and challenging situations. Participants



experienced personal growth in a variety of ways. A cross-analysis of the data collected indicated these experiences were rooted in learning (G) and reflection (T).

**Learning.** Most participants described experiences that led to the acquisition of knowledge. Demonstrative of the learning category, Participant 2 seemed to thoughtfully question the practices used by counselors. The participant posted an image of two females in bikinis hanging upside down by their knees on a pull-up bar. The bar appears to be attached to a piece of playground equipment at the beach. The comment read:

“Owling”.... A currently popular trend, and... a silly one! Are we following trends and basing our treatments on the "theory of the week", or are we grounding our practice in genuine, thoughtful treatment planning. I have been confronted with some creative counseling ideas lately, not all of which have inspired my confidence as a professional....

Other participants noted books, videos, or professional development activities led to learning opportunities. Participant 7, for example, posted an image of a client engaging in neuro-feedback. The accompanying comment read, “Went to a session on Neuro-feedback at the NCCA conference. It was very interesting.”

**Reflection.** Over half of the participants indicated personal growth stemmed from reflective practice. For example, Participant 4 provided an image of a chalkboard drawing suggesting many little ideas will lead to one grand idea. The ideas were represented by light bulbs. The comment read, “As I reflect, this is how I feel today. It feels as though I have some good ideas, and I am just waiting for the time and place to place them on paper.” Another participant posted an image of a woman walking on a beach. A quote on the image read, “What can you do today, that you were not capable of a year ago? The participant commented, “This thought has been on my mind a lot as I reflect on where I've been recently, I am hopeful that in another year I

will be able to look back with as much joy as I do now...” Other posts and comments from participants also suggested personal growth through reflective practices.

## **Success**

During internship, success was commonly experienced by participants following self-care. Encouragement (G) emerged as a category during the cross-analysis.

**Encouragement.** All participants indicated experiencing a sense of encouragement during success. Participant 1 submitted an image of an individual standing on a ladder, sculpting a female with long hair blowing in the wind into the side of a large mound of snow and ice. The comment under this image read, “I feel like taking a climbe [sic.] today. There is nothing like the feeling that you get once you reach the top of the mountain.”

The image and comments based on the Circle of Success (view image here: <https://goo.gl/fZ19PS>) submitted by Participant 9 appeared to exemplify the encouragement category. The circle includes the word success with arrows pointing to words such as “work,” “passion,” and “ideas.” The words on the perimeter of the circle are connected by arrows suggesting one leads to the other. The comment read, “Regardless where you start all the steps in the circle moves you forward toward your goal SUCCESS!!”

Participant 3 described feelings of success through encouragement when submitting an image of a male in suit and tie with balled fists and arms spread in the air. The comment read:

This is me of course but a woman though. This past week has been a relief knowing that I don't have to deal with the drama, moods, and disrespect anymore. Thank goodness it is over. I've never felt so good about anything but when I walked out of the house I thought to myself wow I made it through this site.

## **Challenges**

Participants experienced various challenges throughout the field placement semester. These challenges involved the participants' adjustment and transition to working at the field placement site. An image and caption posted by Participant 7 exemplified the challenges described by participants. This participant posted an image of a male in a suit and tie. The gentleman in the image appears confused and is scratching his head as four question marks float above. The comment read, "I can say this being a new site for me that I am confused at this point because I'm learning so many new people along with new material and rules. At this point I don't really know what to expect to obtain from the site."

Participant 10 described acclimating to work with sexual abuse survivors. This participant posted an image of a young female with eyes closed wearing a dress sitting in a corner of a room. The image also offered statistics including, "One out of every three girls will be sexually assaulted by the age of 18..." and "1 out of 7 children are abused..." The question, "How many do you know?" and statement "You can't afford to ignore it..." were also provided.

The comment submitted with the image read:

Initially, I was very hesitant to work with sexual abuse victims. I felt unexperienced and uncomfortable. I still have a lot to learn... but I really enjoy working with this population now. Thinking about furthering my education regarding sexual abuse.

## **Stress**

Stress was the most common experience described by participants. A cross analysis indicated stress was closely related to field placement sites (G) and work/school (T).

**Field placement sites.** All participants indicated experiencing stress at their field placement site. For example, Participant 6 described the field placement experience as stressful by posting an image of a physically stressed individual in a suit and tie sitting behind a desk with

a steaming computer. The individual has bloodshot eyes, clenched teeth, and is grasping onto their hair with each hand. The participant elaborated on the stress by stating:

I am so frustrated with my site. The clients get to do whatever they want and run all over staff and nothing gets done about it at all. Gosh I wish I was in control of that site I would know exactly what to do. All the site is about is keeping heads in the bed not trying to change them as a person or even help. I want to kick all of them out, and start fresh....What are agencies coming too.

Another participant, when describing stress, posted an image of a woman with bloodshot eyes. The heading on the image read, "By day a Rogerian counselor, at night, she turned into PSYCHO-THERAPIST." The participant commented, "As co-faciliator for substance abuse group, whenever I carry ongoing issues from the previous week, I feel alittle overwhelm." These examples are indicative of other participants' experiences.

**Work/school.** Experiences at work and school also led participants to experience unpleasant emotions. Participant 8, for instance, provided an image of a female clinching her open laptop on the sides with each hand. The female's face appears tense and stressed as she clamps down on the mousepad with her teeth. "Frustration, Frustration, Frustration... so much to do, so little time," read the statement accompanying the image.

Participant 2 also demonstrated marked stress experienced during work/school. This participant submitted an image of a physically stressed male student with bags under eyes and clenched teeth and grabbing head with his hands. The student is wearing a satchel while a portfolio leans against his leg. The image includes the following statements: "constantly anxious about next assignment," "grinds teeth," "bites fingernails," and "feet hurt from running around like an idiot," among others (view image here: <https://goo.gl/g5Ns1b>). The comment that accompanied this

image read, “This is how I feel after studying and working with clients all day, at times it can become overwhelming and stressful. It's time for a vacation to relax.” This image and comment are also representative of stress stemming from the field placement site.

### **Clinical Experiences**

Participants described myriad clinical experiences over the course of the semester. Clinical experiences often led to successes as well as challenges. These experiences comprise the process and procedures of counseling: client intervention (G), relationships/rapport (T), ethical practice (V), and supervision (V).

**Client intervention.** All participants indicated they gained experience with client interventions. As a result of these experiences, Participant 9 suggested the value and importance of client intervention in the counseling process. An image of an abstract drawing of a female was submitted. Two skinny trees stand behind the female. Numerous tags hang from the branches of these trees. Words including LIAR, FOOL, REBEL, BETRAY, and MANIPULATE are written on the tags. The comment read, “Art Therapy is an excellent therapeutic activity because it allows the child/adolescent to talk about their own problems using metaphors and narratives. This also works well with some adults.”

**Relationships/rapport.** Out of eleven participants, six highlighted experiences related to relationship development and building rapport with clients. Participant 4 provided an example of the power of establishing relationships and rapport in counseling. The participant posted an image of a heart. The boarder of the heart was made out of white, pink, and red flower petals. Six tealight candles were equally spaced along the boarder of the heart. The comment read:

I'm actually loving my site.... not only am I learning but I'm actually building relationships with the clients which they enjoy because they feel that no one wants to have anything to

do with them. My clients also has newborns living with them and that makes it more enjoyable.

**Ethical practice.** A few participants expressed concerns of professional and ethical practice. For example, Participant 2 highlighted ethical practice with an image of professional football players during a football game. The comment below the image read, “Struggling this week just like the Redskins in the playoffs to make sure I am providing good ethical counseling skills.”

**Supervision.** A few participants indicated they participated in supervision while gaining clinical experience at their site. Participant 5, for example, provided an image of a baby learning to walk at three different stages in the process (i.e., sitting, scooting, and walking) when describing supervision. The comment read:

After my supervision this week, this is what I feel like. It made me feel good for her to tell me she was going to use some of my stuff cause it made since [sic] and was easier for the client to understand.

Alternatively, Participant 9 indicated the supervision received was not supportive. This participant posted an image of a manager sitting at a desk throwing trash into the suggestion box. The comment stated, “My impression of my supervisor this week.” While all participants should have engaged in supervision as part of their clinical experience, only a few mentioned the activity.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study related to the field experiences of counselors-in-training are consistent with findings from previous research (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Howard et al., 2006; Mansor et al., 2013; Parker, 2014; Wagner & Hill, 2015). Counseling students completing internship requirements appear to have experiences similar to students at other stages in counselor

education programs (e.g., entrance, 1<sup>st</sup> year, practicum). These experiences lead to insecurities, stress, growth, and development during internship. This study contributed to and extended current knowledge by offering additional insight into the internship experiences of counselors-in-training.

Prior to internship, all participants completed a practicum experience including 100 hours of supervised practice where they were acclimated to their field placement site. However, the experiences of the participants during internship appear to reflect a continued intersection between the perceived life of a counselor and the realities of professional practice. A degree of dissonance seems appropriate as students develop into practicing clinicians; however, these discomforts should subside to some degree as students journey through the field placement experience. Field placement experiences are laden with thoughts, emotions, and behaviors students must manage through varied methods.

When gaining clinical experience, the participants appeared to face challenges that led to personal growth as suggested by Furr and Carroll (2003) and Wagner and Hill (2015). One participant captured the nuances of clinical experience by suggesting, “I have been confronted with some creative counseling ideas lately, not all of which have inspired my confidence as a professional....”. Additionally, participants attributed successes during clinical experience to self-care. One participant indicated, “backpacking regularly keeps me relaxed, grounded, and inspired,” highlighting the relationship between self-care and success. While the source is unclear, encouragement appeared to serve as a mediating factor for the self-care and success of students participating in field placement. Lazovsky and Shimoni (2007) and Nuttgens and Chang (2013) suggested encouragement, whether provided by the university or site supervisor, is a growth-supporting factor.

Several categories emerged to varying degrees when considering the clinical experiences of participants. For example, interventions were described by all participants, while less emphasis was placed on relationships and rapport building. Ethical practice and supervision were rarely mentioned. The novelty of implementing interventions may outweigh the value participants placed on the fundamental aspects of counseling (e.g., relationships, ethical practice). Students in internship typically know some intervention strategies and are highly motivated to use them. Therefore, participants may have unconsciously minimized their involvement in building effective counselor-client relationships in lieu of posting more engaging, action-oriented activities such as client interventions. This notion aligns with a preoccupation of interventions among counseling students as noted by Shuler and Keller-Dupree (2015).

The findings of this study indicate stress is a potential antecedent to self-care. The participants appeared to reactively engage in self-care immediately following stress rather than maintaining a consistent regimen across the field experience. Findings also suggest that stressful experiences often led participants toward personal growth. Stress appeared to stem from the inability of participants to find a healthy work-life balance. For example, one participant suggested, “after studying and working with clients all day, at times it can become overwhelming and stressful.” Clinical sites were another source of stress among participants. One participant perceived a level of dysfunction at their site when indicating, “I am so frustrated with my site. The clients get to do whatever they want...” Other participants faced stressors related to learning the site processes and procedures. Graduate students often have a complicated balance of family, work, and academic pressures to navigate (Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2006; Lenz, Sangganjanavanich, Balkin, Oliver, & Smith, 2012; Roach & Young, 2007; Smith, Robinson, &



Young, 2007). Reaching the field placement milestone in a counselor education program brings excitement, uncertainty, and apprehension.

When stress impairs a student's ability to succeed academically and personally or hinders efforts to work with clients in a safe and effective manner, responsibility to intervene lies with the counselor education program and its faculty (ACA, 2014; CACREP, 2016). However, the findings of this study indicate counselors-in-training engaged in internship are resilient and tend to cope and adjust to experiences despite varying degrees of life responsibilities and program support. As one participant commented, "I feel like taking a climbe [sic] today. There is nothing like the feeling that you get once you reach the top of the mountain."

### **Limitations**

One inherent limitation of CQR is the possibility of bias. Three of the four members of the research team were graduate students in a clinical mental health counseling program at the university where the study was conducted. While CQR emphasizes the use of an egalitarian research team to gain multiple perspectives, establish consensus, and account for bias, it is possible that research team members, in anticipation of starting field placement themselves, experienced anxieties that influenced data analysis. The use of an external auditor served to further limit the potential for bias by providing an objective method of checks and balances clear of program and research obligations. Additionally, at the time the data analysis occurred, the researcher was a faculty member of the counselor education program in which the graduate students were enrolled. It is possible the graduate students felt pressured to satisfy the researcher. Finally, the three graduate students and the auditor who served on the research team were female. Utilizing a homogenous research team may have compromised the data analysis. Despite measures of trustworthiness implemented, utilizing a heterogeneous research team is a best practice.

Another potential limitation is that this study included eleven participants enrolled in a counselor education program in the midst of significant programmatic changes. The program was transitioning from SAC to CMHC in preparation for review by CACREP (2009). As a result, some of the participants were in a 48-hour program and some in a 60-hour program. Additionally, some students were completing their first 300-hour internship and some were completing their second internship. These varied experiences and expectations could have influenced the field placement process prior to and during the internship experience. This consideration may lead researchers to ponder whether the experiences of students in practicum, internship I, or internship II are substantially different.

### **Implications**

While counselor educators cannot govern all elements of the field placement experience, it is feasible to address many issues and concerns through programmatic initiatives. Implementing more structured field placement processes that offer support, address wellness, and provide greater oversight of clinical settings, including supervision, may enhance the experiences of counselors-in-training.

Counselor educators should consider ways to support and facilitate the development of students prior to and during field placement experiences. Structured and comprehensive field placement orientations that begin early in the program and prepare the student for the realities of clinical work are prudent. Field placement orientations can include a variety of supportive elements. Barbee, Scherer, and Combs (2003) suggested implementing pre-practicum service-learning activities to prepare students for clinical experiences. A mentorship program aimed at developing relationships between students who are in later stages of field experience with students who are beginning practicum also may prove beneficial. Additionally, counseling programs can

host panel discussions that include recent graduates, site supervisors, and field placement instructors to support students entering field placement. Such initiatives may serve to normalize field placement experiences, establish appropriate expectations, and foster preparation and development.

Students participating in field placement courses can also benefit from counselor education programs that adopt supervision models inherently supportive in nature and developmentally appropriate. For example, Tentoni (1995) proposed a mentoring model which aligns with the developmental phases of counselors espoused by the integrated developmental model (IDM; Stoltenberg, McNeill, & Delworth, 1998). The mentoring model included five roles: teaching, sponsoring, encouraging, counseling, and befriending. The roles encourage modeling of appropriate counselor behaviors, providing care and concern for well-being, and nurturing a collegial and egalitarian relationship with counseling interns. A model that emphasizes counselor development, while highlighting the role of the therapeutic relationship in effective treatment and outcomes, may lead students to a greater appreciation for and acknowledgement of fundamental aspects of the counseling process.

In addition to supporting site supervisors, counseling programs can provide clinical supervision training to students prior to entering field placement experiences. The findings of this study can serve as the basis for development of a supervision preparation curriculum geared to enhance knowledge, attitudes, and skills of students. Instructional opportunities could range from a workshop to a 1-3 credit course that includes instruction on professional dispositions, time-management, wellness, and psycho-educational content. In a brief workshop students may find a presentation of this study appealing. Programs that offer a clinical supervision course should carefully consider logistical issues such as course placement and its impact on the counseling

curriculum. Affording students the opportunity to gain knowledge of the fundamentals of clinical supervision models and methods may dispel unrealistic expectations, normalize their experience, and increase their sense of efficacy.

Given the degree of stress experienced by participants in this study, counselor education programs should consider embedding a wellness model in the curriculum which may enhance students' ability to manage field placement experiences. Counselor educators have many opportunities to infuse wellness strategies as permanent and pervasive parts of their training programs. Dowden, Warren, and Kambui (2014) proposed a three-tiered model for improving self-awareness and self-care. This model aims to foster wellness among pre-service counselors through specific cognitive behavioral techniques. Counselor educators can embed this model in field placement courses or use it in a prescriptive manner to enhance the wellness of individual students. Additionally, Wolf, Thompson, and Smith-Adcock (2012) advocated using the Indivisible Self model of wellness (IS-Wel; Myers & Sweeney, 2005). A holistic approach based on Individual Psychology, the IS-Wel model, provides a framework of specific wellness initiatives incorporated at the individual, programmatic, and university levels. One approach of this model, curriculum integration, advocates for the integration of wellness strategies and activities throughout all courses of the program. Alternatively, Abel, Abel, and Smith (2012) endorsed a preventive approach to stress and burnout through the use of a dedicated stress management course available for counseling students. This course was found to produce positive changes in anxiety and stress levels among graduate counseling students. The structured format of a course of this nature may allow students to more effectively teach valuable stress management skills to their clients, an indirect benefit.

Prosek, Holm, and Daly (2013) found that required counseling can decrease overall problems and levels of depression and anxiety for counseling students. Many counseling programs encourage students to seek counseling for overall wellness or to address specific concerns that arise which interrupt academic progress or therapeutic effectiveness. Counselor educators also can require students to participate in counseling. This requirement would serve as another preventive measure but it is wrought with ethical and legal concerns.

Counselor education faculty members serving in the role of field placement coordinators (FPC) must maintain greater oversight of field placements. This is achievable by vetting sites and supervisors using rigorous standards and requirements. Counselor education programs also should move toward placing students at sites that are mutually suited which may further reduce anxieties and increase satisfaction with the field placement process and experience.

Counselor educators should note the novel way in which technology was used in this study to capture the experiences of students completing internship requirements. It is critical for instructors of field placement courses to strongly consider creative and innovative ways to gauge the lived experiences of their students. Developing accessible, yet secure platforms for open dialog and communication prior to and throughout the field placement experience may foster a sense of community and support while providing a glimpse into the lives of students. For example, through technology counselor education programs can create blogs, moderate discussion forums, manipulate social media, and develop a presence in virtual 3-D worlds such as Second Life (<http://secondlife.com>). These initiatives may provide space for students to share lived experiences with faculty and peers. Additionally, with the advent of new technology such as Google Glass (<https://www.google.com/glass/start/>), counselor educators have the ability to witness in “real-time” the lived experiences of field placement students. Counselor educators

should embrace the opportunities to implement alternative and innovative methods to better understand and support students participating in field experiences. However, counselor educators must consider the implications of utilizing technology and ensure safeguards are in place to protect student and client information.

Future research should include an exploration of students' experiences across all field placement experiences (i.e., practicum, internship I, and internship II). Counselor educators will need to investigate which types of continuum-based services and policies are most effective in supporting students preparing for, entering, and completing field placements. Researching ways to successfully integrate wellness initiatives throughout training programs appears an imperative given the stressful nature of field placement experiences and the lives of graduate students. Additionally, counselor educators can explore ways innovative strategies, including various forms technology, can enhance the field placement experience.

Understanding the experiences of counseling students enrolled in field placement courses is vital to counselor educators' preparing exemplary professional counselors. This study offered a creative method for capturing the lived experiences of counseling students enrolled in an internship. The authors hope these findings will challenge researchers and counselor educators to seek ways to support counselors-in-training with developmentally appropriate experiences for students enrolled in courses at all stages of their programs.

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