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## In the Gap: Peer Support Group Experiences for Post-Graduate, Pre-Licensed Counseling Candidates

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## In the Gap: Peer Support Group Experiences for Post-Graduate, Pre-Licensed Counseling Candidates

### Abstract

Counselor development evolves throughout one's professional tenure. One unique phase is the developmental gap post-graduation and pre-licensure in which counseling candidates develop an autonomous sense of self beyond the institution in which they were trained. This study sought to explore those "in the gap" experiences for eight CACREP graduates who participated in a five-session peer support group. A content-driven thematic analysis revealed (a) a feeling of disconnection and (b) a sense of disillusionment brought participants to the group, and (c) a need for homecoming, (d) a call for continued growth, and (e) a practice of empowerment were received by participants from the group. Outcomes promote continued support to counseling graduates— particularly within peer support group experiences —to offer developmental benefits in this timeframe.

### Keywords

groups, peer support, counselor development, thematic analysis, qualitative

Counselor training is a targeted curricular and experiential learning opportunity in which counselors-in-training (CIT) are taught the requisite skills and knowledge needed to promote ethically competent counseling care. Inherent to this process is the progressive and evolving sense-of-self that becomes established, first as a layperson and later as a developing professional (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Curricular experiences are often designed with developmental progression in mind, seeking to provide a scaffold to educational and developmental successes including improvements to self-efficacy (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019; Johnson, Baker, Kopala, Kiselica, & Thompson, 1989; Larson, Clark, Wesely, Koraleski, Daniels, & Smith, 1999; Larson & Daniels, 1998). To further assist in this developmental process, faculty offer guidance and support through advising, mentoring, supervision, and other faculty-assisted learning opportunities to help nurture the emerging helping professional.

Over time – both in counselor training and beyond – CITs begin to develop a professional identity as a helping professional. Nugent and Jones (2009) defined professional identity as the incorporation of personal attributes and professional skills within a professional context. Customary within this developmental process, however, is CIT anxiety and self-doubt, encounters also regarded as “novice stressors” (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003, p. 46). These stressors are especially associated with achieving mastery and competence as a helping professional. In fact, “many students are admitted to graduate school in the counseling and therapy professions because they excel at mastering the intellectual content in academic classes. However, this skill set does not translate directly to the complexity of practice” (p. 46). It is in these early years of development that support is most requested by developing professionals and arguably most valuable to their developing sense of self-efficacy (Fitch, Pistole, & Gunn, 2010; Larson & Daniels, 1998). Given the challenges associated with these early developmental years, the current study endeavored to

better understand the unique experiences of developing helping professionals as they transitioned beyond graduate counselor training into pre-licensed counseling experiences, through their participation in a multi-session peer support group experience.

### **Counselor Development**

Much attention has been given to the developmental experiences of emerging counseling professionals. While no one model is considered all-encompassing for counselor development, several respected models have been detailed (e.g., Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982; McNeill & Stoltenberg, 2016, Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Fundamentally, throughout a helper's development, the trainee relies upon multiple influences including professors, colleagues, clients, research, theories, and their own personal experiences to move from a reliance on external authority to their own internal authority as professionals. Counselor development is also largely impacted by the CIT's ability to connect with adequate supervision and then to individuate and create a unique counseling identity in subsequent therapy practices (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019). Ultimately, this integration of personal-self and professional-self is paramount in the counselor's overall development.

To navigate the challenges of identity development, it is common for *beginning* CITs to compartmentalize their personal and professional identities while *advanced* students show more signs of incorporating personal attributes into their professional identity (Gibson et al., 2010; Wagner & Hill, 2015). Simply put, as more experiential knowledge and ability is gained through practicum and internship, the CIT becomes better able to apply skills alongside personal attributes, thus allowing a fusion of personal and professional identities. It is also expected that CITs shift from an external locus of identity to an internal locus as they move through counselor training (Gibson et al., 2010; Wagner & Hill, 2015). Gibson and colleagues (2010) postulated that as

beginning CITs glean information and insights primarily from their professors at the onset of the curriculum experience, they look externally to professors for validation. As CITs gain more professional experience, they become better able to internalize feedback so that they may assess their own abilities in practice (Gibson et al., 2010). Successful implementation of feedback improves CIT self-efficacy and confidence which enables trainees to progress toward an internal locus of professional identity (Wagner & Hill, 2015).

Despite the efforts by faculty in training programs to help CITs establish their professional counselor identity through training experiences, research shows that many emerging helpers enter the professional field re-experiencing the earlier stages of identity development (Moss, Gibson, & Dollarhide, 2014; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). Loganbill et al. (1982) highlighted this re-experiencing phenomenon by noting that counselors develop less linearly and more through a recycling, in which helpers move through stages of stagnation, confusion, and integration multiple times across their professional lifespan. Moreover, many novice counselors are surprised and disappointed by the realities of their work, suggesting that their professional identity may not have been fully grounded in or translated to a professional context (Moss et al., 2014; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). Such disappointment in professional roles and the workplace can have negative implications for further counseling practice, including levels of burnout and compassion fatigue (Malasch, 2003; Thompson, Amatea, & Thompson, 2014).

### **Supervision, Peer Support, and Groups**

Regardless of the developmental model being conceptualized and implemented throughout and after counselor training, support is needed for the developing professional. One formal means of support comes through supervision. Supervision is a deliberative, evaluative, and integral part of counseling training and pre-licensing experiences, and when facilitated effectively, it can

provide a discernible opportunity for support to the developing professional (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019). Gazzola and Theriault (2007) discussed the areas of counselor development that become impeded when supervision and counseling experiences are negative. In their research, the broadening effect of supervision, including a positive working alliance, as well as the narrowing effect of supervision, including inflexibility of thoughts and negative working relationships, both impact overall counselor development. The authors note that creating a nurturing environment, displaying positive personal qualities, validating and empowering, and providing conditions of growth all lead to aspects of broadening. In contrast, supervisors being inflexible, providing inadequate feedback, contributing to dysfunctional relationship dynamics, and showing a lack of sensitivity are characteristics of counselor development narrowing. Supervision and feedback are two necessary components to counselor development; lack of consideration for either/both can significantly hinder overall counselor development.

Developing counselors can also experience supervision-like support more informally, for example in the form of peer supervision or peer support groups. This format is unique in that the group composition is leaderless whereas traditional group supervision involves some hierarchy in which the leader has greater expertise and training (Akhurst & Kelly, 2006). Peer supervision offers an alternative arrangement for providing and receiving feedback which can be approached by unstructured or structured means and without an evaluative component (Lewis, Greenburg, & Hatch, 1988), thus allowing feedback to be more palatable for the developing professional. Peers support groups and peer supervision can also encourage validation and solidarity (Akhurst & Kelly, 2006) as well as burnout prevention (Marks & Hixon, 1986).

Another way in which helping professionals and helpers-in-training may feel supported beyond supervisory experiences, is through the use of encounter or support groups, both of which

occur without a supervisory element. Yalom (2017), a proponent and pioneer of group therapy research and practice, voiced that “one paradox of life as a therapist is that we are never alone while working, and yet many of us experience deep isolation” (p. 310). He further reflected on his personal experience of participating in a leaderless encounter group of professionals for over 500 sessions by noting that each group encounter invites an opportunity to learn something novel about himself and his group members.

Other researchers have echoed the value of group encounters – both in the form of formal therapy groups and support groups. Brunelli, Murphy, and Athanaou (2016) explained support groups as voluntary, small groups designed for the mutual help and fulfillment of a common purpose, for overcoming a shared problem that alters one’s normal life course, and/or for achieving a social change regarding a shared problem. Harel, Shechtman, and Cutrona (2011) reported that supportive relationships, which are often evident in support groups and peer support, may provide hope and increase self-confidence, while acting as an important buffer against stress and isolation. For helpers-in-training, group participation has been shown to assist with empathy, acceptance, and tolerance for emotional experiences (Kline, Falbaum, Pope, Hargraves, & Hundley, 1997)

Involvement in support groups may also bolster professional development and aid helping professionals, both in-training and post-licensure, in coping with common struggles which occur throughout development. As a CIT, participation in a group may help alleviate novice stressors, bolster personal and professional development (Ieva, Ohrt, Swank, & Young, 2009; Payne, 1999), and also illustrate what the role of a group facilitator can entail (Shapiro, Peltz, & Bernadette-Shapiro, 1998). Ieva and colleagues (2009) further highlighted that communication with peers in an experiential group setting can allow CITs to recognize personal strengths and growth areas and apply skills and information which they had previously learned in the course of their graduate

training. Lastly, Ulman (2008) found that mental health professionals experiencing vicarious traumatization found significant aid in formalized peer groups, as these groups allowed them to combat isolation by creating a sense of community within the profession, while also sharing common experiences which effectively normalized the hardships of their work.

A common thread throughout these varying group experiences is the presence of community within the profession. While feedback and interaction with peers can allow CITs to combat novice stressors and build professional competence, communication around shared experiences may work against isolation, which frequently breeds burnout and vicarious traumatization in the field. Therefore, by providing this format of peer communication, peer support groups can benefit the counselor across many stages of counselor development.

### **Purpose of the Study**

It is in the intersection of these important topics – counselor development, peer support, and group experiences – that the current study was conceived. Counselor identity development has been well-explored from a lifespan perspective (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 1992; 1995; 2003), and research has also targeted the positive impacts of group experiences *within* counselor training (Ieva, Ohrt, Swank, & Young, 2009). However, as developmental theories have noted, a regression to initial anxieties, fears, and insecurities often occurs upon entry into the real-world of counseling (Loganbill et al., 1982; Moss, Gibson, & Dollarhide, 2014; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). It is in this crucible of a time that additional support could be beneficial, yet often is received primarily through formal supervisory experiences.

The current study sought to add to the body of knowledge concerning group support and counselor development experiences for counseling candidates who are “in the gap” – post-graduation and pre-licensure – through their participation in a multi-session peer support group

experience. To guide the inquiry, the following research question was conceived: What are the experiences of counselor candidates who are post-graduation and pre-licensure who participate in a peer support group experience? A content-driven thematic analysis was then conducted to analyze the qualitative data provided within the current study.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The original group experience included 12 graduates from a CACREP accredited Master's in Counseling program at one institution in the Midwest, each of whom graduated between 2015 and 2017. Of the participants, one was male (8%) and 11 were female (92%). All group members were currently pursuing licensure as either a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) or Licensed Alcohol and Drug Counselor (LADC), were receiving supervision, and were employed by an agency. Of the original group membership, eight group members ( $n = 8$ ; 75%) volunteered to participate in the research portion of the study. Given the small sample size inherent to qualitative studies and the potential for identifying information in the data analysis, no identifying or demographic information was collected from group members who elected to participate in the study.

### **Procedure**

Prior to the group being formed, one future group member propositioned the principal investigator (PI) to the study about facilitating a group counseling experience for recent graduates of the counseling program. The group member noted that she would recruit other graduates using a private social media group. The PI noted that group participation would require the following: (a) confirmation of graduation in the M.S. in Counseling program from 2015 to 2017; (b) current status as a Counselor Candidate for Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) or Licensed Alcohol

and Drug Counselor (LADC); and (c) ability to attend a three-hour group for six sessions over a three-month period. The PI further noted that the group would be conducted as a closed group, meaning that once membership was confirmed, no new members would be eligible to begin.

Recruitment was conducted by a group member using snowball or chain-referral methodology (Bagheri & Saadati, 2015) within the closed social media group, with 12 graduates self-nominating participation. This sampling methodology can be particularly helpful when seeking participation from individuals within "...small, hidden groups dispersed within a large population" (Bagheri, & Saadati, 2015, p. 5). Given that all group participants were graduates of a counseling program, thereby familiar with the potential benefits of intra- and interpersonal processing within group experiences, the PI did not initially disclose the research intent to group members, thus involving deception as a research protocol. The PI sought to involve deception as a means to promote organic participation and to protect the data collection process from misattribution of personal experiences. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the PI's institution approved the research design involving deception, and the research intent was revealed to the participants following the final group session.

Over a three-month period, group members participated in five group counseling experiences, each lasting three hours. The original design involved six sessions, though one session was cancelled due to group illness. Each session involved an opening question, prompt, or brief activity facilitated by the PI, with the remaining portion of the group experience involving participant-led discussion. Based on participant discussion, the PI (group facilitator) would occasionally transition into a psychoeducational role, providing information and resources as relevant. The overall structure of the group was participant-led and facilitator-supported.

## **Data Collection**

Following the final group sessions, group members were told of the PI's intent to explore the experiences of the peer support group. Group members were informed that participation in the study was voluntary and would involve completion of an online informed consent and four open-ended questions, all of which would be collected through a secure Google Form. Group members who elected to participate in the study first completed an informed consent and then proceeded to answer the following questions: (a) what led you to participate in the group experience; (b) what impact did the group experience have, if any, on your personal and professional development; (c) which session stood out as most helpful and why?; and (d) what recommendations do you have for Counselor Candidates (post-graduate but pre-licensed counselors-under-supervision). Participant responses were then downloaded and compiled into a password protected data document by the PI. The data document was distributed to four graduate counseling students who were research team members to the study.

## **Data Coding and Analysis**

All research team members were current graduate counseling students at the same institution as the participants to the study; none of the research team members were participants in the group counseling experience. Prior to data coding, the research team members were taught about qualitative analysis, with specific instruction given regarding data collection and coding protocols. A content-driven thematic analysis was conducted to promote an extensive review of data and subsequent emergence of final themes (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). Within content-driven analysis, also called exploratory analysis, research questions are often used to gather the exploratory data that is analyzed through content-driven analysis. Data can be brief, for example, "something as simple as a single-word response to an open-ended question on a survey"

or extensive, such as "...a corpus of text thousands of pages in length" (Guest et al., 2012, p. 11). Specific codes and categories are not predetermined but rather unfold through the data analysis process as "the researcher carefully reads and rereads the data, looking for key words, trends, themes, or ideas in the data that will help outline the analysis" (Guest et al., 2012, p. 7). The length of time for data analysis can vary based on the data received for analysis, thus sufficient time was spent preparing the research team members on coding experiences before coding began. Following data analysis by the research team members, member checking with original participants was also conducted to confirm the accuracy of the final codes.

### **Measures of Trustworthiness**

While independently coding the qualitative data, team members were instructed to use a research notebook to bracket their initial thoughts, assumptions, biases, or opinions. Following completion of independent coding, all team members met the PI to explore the movement of the codes from open to axial to selective codes. The coding protocol is consistent with other exploratory approaches such as grounded theory, thus regarded as an appropriate approach for providing rigorous structure to the content-driven analysis (Guest et al., 2012). The final codes were selected as representations of the participants' experiences to the study.

After final codes were confirmed by the research team, an external auditor who did not participate at any point in the current study, was asked to evaluate the accuracy of the final themes based on the written artifacts provided by the group members. Lastly, the PI to the study then contacted all group members to the study through the original social media platform and invited individuals who participated in the research portion of the experience to self-nominate participation in the member checking process. Member checking, also known as informant feedback or respondent validation, is a flexible process which involves engaging the research

participants for follow-up interviews, triangulation of the data, or confirmation of findings (Madill & Sullivan, 2017). This measure of validity and trustworthiness in qualitative research is considered a “goal standard of quality”, (p. 3) though it is also regarded as controversial in its effectiveness due to subjectivity of individual experiences. The PI facilitated member checking phone calls with five of the eight self-nominated group members and research participants to explore the accuracy and completeness of the final themes. Each of these methodological strategies were enacted to promote the trustworthiness of findings in this study.

## **Results**

The current study sought to answer the following research question: What are the experiences of counselor candidates who are post-graduation and pre-licensure who participate in a peer support group experience? Through rigorous content-driven data analysis, two categorical frameworks and five emergent themes were revealed in the participants’ lived responses. The two categorical frameworks were (a) what brought the counselor candidate “to the group” experience and (b) what they received “from the group” experience. Within these frameworks, the following five themes emerged: (a) a feeling of disconnection, (b) a sense of disillusionment, (c) a need for homecoming, (d) a call for continued improvement, and (e) a practice of empowerment. A brief exploration of each finding is offered in the space to follow.

### **A Feeling of Disconnection**

The first theme that emerged from the data was a feeling of disconnection. Participants of the study explicitly voiced feelings of “being alone” and “disconnected” during this developmental stage. Experiences were shared about the post-graduation and pre-licensed experience as “overwhelming”, “challenging”, “difficult”, and “vulnerable.” One participant wrote “I felt alone in my supervision...” while another shared that she was “feeling overwhelmed and desiring

additional support.” One participant noted that she “wanted to see if there were others going through my fear of not knowing exactly what I’m doing...” Each of these shared experiences illustrated the distinct feelings of developing through disconnection, which contributed to the counseling candidates’ desire to participate in the group.

### **A Sense of Disillusionment**

The second theme which emerged from the data was a sense of disillusionment. Participants readily voiced that the “actual field” of counseling differed greatly from their perceived professional expectations. One participant shared that “the trenches of the field are so different from the classroom. My idea of what world I would step into was very different from reality, even though I was dedicated to this site through internship.” The same participant further noted that these experiences were “worlds apart” from each other. Another participant explored the differences between training and practice by noting that “there is a lot about the profession that school does not teach...”

Several participants also explored the letdown with supervisory experiences during their counselor candidacy, which contributed to their personal and professional disillusionment. For example, one participant reflected on her “horrible supervision” while another shared that “I needed people who understood how frustrating it is to have bad supervision. I needed a place to talk openly about the trials and triumphs of working in the mental health field.” A final participant shared that “internship was different than being out in the field, and while internship allowed us to practice, we had a well-working safety net underneath us. There should be a harness of some kind too after graduation because supervision isn’t enough, even in [a] positive supervisory relationship.” Through each participant’s reflections, it became evident that therapy, as taught in graduate school, differed from the reality of working as a therapist in the “actual field.” This

differential created a dissonance that the participants sought to remedy through the group counseling experience.

### **A Need for Homecoming**

The third theme that emerged from the data was the need for homecoming. This term was chosen by the research team given the affective and literal experience of this word. Homecoming is often used to literally or figuratively denote a return or reunion for people who share a kinship and familiarity. Participants routinely voiced the support, comfort, familiarity, safety, and shared community experienced by participating in a group with their former counseling cohort. One participant noted that “I wanted to reconnect with my fellow cohort to discuss our experiences and challenges as a new therapist, share resources, and have emotional support.” Similarly, another participant shared that “...I sought the group for support and comradery.” Yet another participant noted that “... [I] wanted to reconnect with people that had a similar education background” while another discussed that “I feel a comfort and confidence knowing there are others in my cohort that have similarly experienced what I have so far in my journey.” One group member explored her feelings of “safety” in the group and noted that “I feel this was possible thanks to the familiarity a cohort shares after the graduation experience.” Relatedly, another participant voiced that “I do not think this depth would have been possible in a random sample of LPC candidates brought together regardless of cohort.” The participants’ experiences voiced the connection, comfort, and support that was available to the group members through a shared training and developmental experience.

### **A Call for Continued Growth**

The fourth theme which emerged from the data was a call for continued growth. For some participants, the continued growth was evident in skills, resources, or experiences that could later be used in their professional practice. For example, one group member shared that “I struggle

working with children between the ages of 5 and 10. I wanted to learn more about play therapy.” Another group member remarked on an opening activity by stating that it showed her a “...creative approach in processing emotions, successes, or challenges.” Relatedly, one participant shared that “the support helped me to identify and utilize resources to use in my personal and professional development” while another noted that “I was able to glean knowledge and ideas from [the group members’] experiences...” One group member acknowledged that “counseling is a trial and error profession, but cherish the moments you do see progress” while another noted that “I was reminded that we are all still learning...” When exploring the experiences of the group, one participant shared that “it broadened my scope of understanding of the field. It allowed me to understand more the power of boundaries. It gave me a safe and comfortable space to experience self-care in an environment of professional growth and change.”

Reflections of continued growth were also evident in comments that addressed the interpersonal benefits and process gained from the group experience. One group member shared that “the group allowed me to be vulnerable in a way that is truly difficult for me. I do not talk about myself very much anywhere; however the group presented opportunities for me to step out of my comfort zone to share my feelings without criticism.” Another participant voiced that “I got to come to the group and tell my story and [with] just the practice of telling my story, I could parse out what was really happening and that’s invaluable to me.” One participant reflected that “it is extremely hard to juggle both your professional and personal life, especially going into a field that requires so much energy.” Through each entry, participants voiced the various opportunities for growth and learning, both practically and interpersonally, that accompanied the group experience.

## **A Practice of Empowerment**

The final theme which emerged from the data was a practice of empowerment. From the group experience, participants shared about “advocacy”, “empowerment”, “change”, and other actionable steps that are needed to navigate the counselor candidacy developmental phase. One participant boldly advised “Join or start a support group for new therapists!!!” while another noted “If your cohort does not have a support group, start one!” Continuing the discussion of the importance of the training cohort, another participant advised, “Stay close to the people in your cohort as you graduate. Bounce ideas off of them. Be open to their hard answers,” while another noted “stay connected with your cohort and faculty.” Whether exploring the support of same-cohort group experiences or of other professionals in general, the trend was encouragement to “get together to talk”, “build your support group”, and “be your own advocate.”

Another theme within empowerment was the advocacy for boundaries. Several participants voiced that the group experience reiterated the need for boundaries and helped participants begin to instate boundaries in more meaningful ways. One participant stated that through the group, “I learned to say ‘NO’ professionally.” Relatedly, another group member noted that “the group helped me realize that I can advocate for myself [and] say NO. That word has been so helpful to me. It’s easy for me to say no to things outside of my work life; however at my job, it feels foreign because I think I can do it all as long as I make time for it to check off my list. I was overwhelmed. The group empathized with me & helped me realize that I’m worth having time for relief.” A different participant noted that counselor candidates need to “set boundaries at work early on (with colleagues and clients).” These empowered statements of support and boundaries were repeated expressions by the participants, each bolstering the ability and trajectory of the counseling candidates to navigate the in-the-gap experience and beyond.

## Discussion

The aim of the current study was to explore experiences of counselor candidates who were post-graduation and pre-licensure who participated in a multi-session group experience. Using a content-driven thematic analysis qualitative research design, responses from eight group members who participated in a five-session group experience were coded for common themes. From the data, two overarching categories and five emerging themes were identified, each of which are explored in the section to follow.

### **“To the Group” Framework**

The first overarching category is the “to the group” framework, which essentially reflects the experiences that brought the group members “to the group” for participation. To revisit the design of the group and the study, group members self-selected participation through a chain referral methodology. Thus, participants noted that they sought participation in the group due to a feeling of disconnection (Theme 1) in their new role as a counselor candidate. They further noted that this isolation and disconnection contributed to a feeling of disillusionment in the profession (Theme 2) with which they were once excited to enter. During the member check process, all participants ( $n = 5$ ; 100% of member checked participants) noted that the disillusionment did not deter them from pursuing the professional work, but rather it “took the shine off” the profession, as one participant voiced. Essentially, the realities and challenges of the profession were brought to light during this counseling candidacy time frame, which ultimately led participants to seek additional support. The emergence of this theme supports Skovholt and Rønnestad’s (2003) findings concerning Phase 4 of counselor development in which the Novice Professional seeks to confirm the validity of their training, followed soon by a period of disillusionment of both

themselves and their training, and lastly enter greater exploration of themselves and their professional environments.

These findings offer important reminders to the complex nature of counselor identity development. The identity development process is often nonlinear, meaning that experiences do not always follow an upward trajectory (Loganbill et al., 1982). New counselors may even return to previously experienced insecurities, fears, or frustrations, developmental findings which have been stated in prior research (e.g., Moss, Gibson, & Dollarhide, 2014; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003), as well as in the current study's outcomes.

### **“From the Group” Framework**

The next categorical framework is described as what the group members received “from the group” experience. Participants shared in their reflections that they felt a need for homecoming (Theme 3), which in essence expressed the support, familiarity, and shared experiences that they felt with helpers who were experiencing similar transitional challenges. It is important to note that “the need for homecoming” was not identified within the “to the Group” framework, but rather was an unexpected outcome that the group members voiced *once they began participation* in the group. In the member check discussions, participants shared that the familiarity of the cohort from their original program of study unexpectedly influenced their process, as they felt collectively comfortable to dive into the work. One member check participant said, “I didn’t know I needed my cohort until I had them in the room. Then I couldn’t wait to see them each and every session.” Another member check participant further shared that the group experience allowed her to “heal her supervision wounds” from her current supervisor due to the relational safety she experienced with the group facilitator (PI) and group members.

Across the group sessions, participants were further reminded of their call for continued growth (Theme 4), including solicitation of knowledge, skills, and resources for their “professional toolbox” in order to improve their daily professional functioning. Several member check participants used the language of “toolbox” to detail the housing of learned skills which came from the group experience, and they further noted that these resources were less explicitly offered during their on-site candidacy supervision experiences. Participants noted a personal responsibility to continue to learn and grow in the work they are promoting, and they also shared that they learned as much from their peers as they did from the group facilitator.

Lastly, participants voiced a practice of empowerment (Theme 5), which involves advocacy for boundaries, self-care, and other burnout prevention strategies. The participants in the member check discussion shared that this theme was arguably the “most important theme”, as the lack of professional self-advocacy became evident across shared conversations within the group experience in all five sessions.

Several of these important findings are rooted in prior research concerning counselor development and training. Skovholt and Rønnestad (1992) noted that counselor development continues to be imperative in the years following formal training, and new counselors may turn to mentors or supervisors for that added support. Furthermore, the experiences voiced by participants echoes the Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) findings which state that novice counselors seek to validate their skills and knowledge while also feeling disillusioned with the profession post-training.

Additionally, part of the disillusionment voiced by participants was due to negative or inadequate supervision experiences with supervisors. The need – and call – for better supervision in this transitional stage mirrors Gazzola and Theriault’s (2007) notion of deleterious effects in the

absence of high-quality supervision. Furthermore, the themes of homecoming, support, and belonging within familiar personal and professional circles highlight the important exchanges that can occur within encounter or support groups (Yalom, 2017), including groups that are facilitated as part of counselor training (Ieva, Ohrt, Swank, & Young, 2009). Findings from this study support that experiences can be supportive and affirming for developing professionals who encounter personal and professional challenges. This study further highlights the benefits of peer support group experiences with non-supervision groups post-graduation who return to the familiarity of their previous cohort from counselor training. As previously noted by Lewis, Greenburg, and Hatch (1988), peer support can offer many beneficial outcomes to developing professionals, including validation and normalization (Akhurt & Kelly, 2006) as well as serving as a buffer for burnout (Marks & Hixon, 1986).

### **Implications of Findings**

Findings from this study offer both confirmation of and added value to previous findings concerning counselor development. Counselor candidates who exist “in the gap” require the requisite knowledge, skill, and capabilities to impart positive changes in the lives of the clients whom they serve. With that said, these same counselor candidates are also in a new stage of developmental transition. Once in a training program which offered formalized learning experiences and supervision to now being increasingly autonomous yet still under evaluation, this developmental timeframe can be fraught with anxiety and uncertainty (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). Counselor candidates may have the erroneous belief that in asking for help, they are somehow conveying an incompetence or lack of appropriate training, as noted by several of the participants to the current study. Thus, isolation increases and challenges become exacerbated. Findings from this study convey a normality to that challenge as well as a framework for suggested

improvements. Given these findings, counselor educators may work to extend their training experiences of counseling graduates beyond the classroom to more informal yet equally beneficial experiences of group support with existing cohorts. Counselor educators may also consider a capstone or seminar course near the end of the graduate training experience to address these important topics. Through these additional training and support experiences, counselor candidates may become better aware of the intricacies and fragilities of this developmental stage, thereby preemptively seeking these supportive exchanges before reaching “a new professional low” (as reported by one member check participant) which can accompany disillusionment and isolation.

For counselor educators who consider facilitating a similar group experience for graduates, it is also worthwhile to consider potential ethical situations that may arise. Particularly in an undefined and unscripted support group experience, any potential topic may be introduced and approached by group members. Participants may inadvertently return to the previously held faculty-student dynamic with which they were/are familiar, thus possibly impacting the level and type of disclosure (by both self and others). In the initial session, group considerations such as the purpose of the group, confidentiality, group facilitator’s role, and other pertinent topics may help participants establish the group experience as different from both former graduate training experiences and current supervision relationships.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

One limitation to the study is the composition of the group used within the study. As all group members were recent graduates of the same training program, group experiences of support (as coded as *a need for homecoming*) may overly state the positive impacts of the group experience. Explored in the reverse, these findings beg the question of “would group members have felt such

a high level of support had they not been within the same training program?” In this question also lies a direction for further research.

Another limitation to the study, which is obvious of most limited participant qualitative designs, is the inherent lack of generalizability of findings. With 12 group members but only 8 from whom to gather data, the data stream is both limited and narrow. A follow up study assessing multiple support groups for counselor candidates could help confirm and further develop findings, also offering greater generalizability of outcomes.

Lastly, all group members were within the same post-graduation window. Specifically, graduates were within two years of completing their counseling degree. As some graduates take time off between formal training and pursuit of licensure, different experiences may also be shown in the data. While this statement is conjecture, future studies could explore the group trends and experiences of participants of counselor candidates immediately following graduate training, two years post training, and longer gaps between training and counselor candidacy.

### **Conclusion**

Counselor development models and theories have offered helping professionals, educators, and supervisors alike with a blueprint for developmental expectations. In these models comes a shared understanding of the vulnerabilities, challenges, successes, and identity formulation of professionals old and new. In efforts to sustain the professional helper and reduce burnout, compassion fatigue, and other professional challenges that plague the industry, continued work is needed into the ways in which we can support our own. Peer support groups for counselor candidates who exist in the gap (post-graduation and pre-licensure) may be one way to bridge the supportive exchanges experienced during graduate training with the new professional ropes experienced in the real counseling world-of-work. In doing so, we may prevent some of the

isolations and challenges that interfere with professional identity development, and we also may offer a new model for continued engagement for professionals who desire intentional contact and support along their professional developmental journey.

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