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A Phenomenological Study of Counseling Students' Learning About Wellness

Abstract

The authors conducted a phenomenological qualitative study of counselor students' experiences of learning about wellness guided by the Indivisible Self (Myers & Sweeney, 2004). Participants ($N = 11$) engaged in the experiential wellness activities during co-curricular group meetings throughout one academic year. Data were analyzed and three themes emerged: Wellness Considerations, Wellness Connections, and Wellness Applications. Limitations and directions for future research are illustrated.

Keywords

wellness, the Indivisible Self, counseling students, counselor preparation

Wellness is recognized as an important and complex construct that embodies applications for improving the quality of individuals' lives (Barden et al., 2015). Wellness is a holistic approach, in which mind, body, and spirit are integrated in a purposeful manner (Myers et al., 2000). Therefore, wellness is a way of life oriented toward optimal health with a goal of living life more fully (Myers et al., 2000). For counseling professionals, wellness is foundational to professional identity and practice (Kaplan et al., 2014; Myers & Sweeney, 2004). Given the importance of wellness within the counseling profession, Myers et al. (2003) recommended incorporating wellness early and throughout counseling students' graduate training programs. Learning about wellness is strengthened when linked to empirically supported evidence such as the Indivisible Self, an evidenced-based model of wellness (Myers & Sweeney, 2004). This model can be incorporated into graduate training to guide counseling students' learning about wellness. Therefore, in the present study, we explored graduate students' process of learning about and engaging in wellness activities, guided by the Indivisible Self (Myers & Sweeney, 2004), throughout one academic year.

Wellness and Counselor Preparation

Researchers noted several benefits to promoting counseling students' learning about wellness. First, wellness-informed educational practices helped counseling students learn the importance and value of wellness (Pence Wolf et al., 2014). Second, engaging in wellness practices during graduate training have positively affected students' development of counseling skills (Buser et al., 2012) and therapeutic relationships (Schure et al., 2008; Pence Wolf et al., 2012). Finally, learning about wellness encouraged counseling students' integration of wellness into their lives (Pence Wolf et al., 2014) and how to help clients achieve wellness-oriented goals (Kaplan et al., 2014).

Others have suggested the importance of counseling students' knowledge and application of wellness concepts so they may be resilient to compassion fatigue, stress, and burnout (Smith et al., 2007). It is essential then, for counseling students to develop strategies for sustaining professional wellness, which will help them combat vulnerability to distress (Burck et al., 2014; Cummins et al., 2007). Additionally, since counseling students will experience the distress when working with clients, it is essential for them to begin learning and applying wellness skills to their personal and professional experiences during their graduate training (Ohrt et al., 2015).

Authors have suggested counselor educators incorporate wellness into the curriculum by introducing wellness directly to graduate students and by developing innovative ways to reinforce attention to its practice. For example, wellness interventions have shown positive outcomes when implemented in counselor education career (Smith et al., 2002), practicum (Lindo et al., 2015), and internship (Storlie & Smith, 2012) courses. Specifically, wellness has been infused into clinical supervision of master's level counseling graduate students (Lenz & Smith, 2010; Meany-Walen et al., 2016). Common outcomes when infusing wellness into supervision included students' increased understanding of wellness, its benefits to self, translating wellness concepts into professional practice and relationships, and maintaining an ongoing commitment to wellness practices (Lenz et al., 2014).

Despite these benefits, it may be challenging for counseling programs to implement wellness across the curriculum or to add specialized coursework due to faculty and student buy-in and time constraints (Keller-Dupree et al., 2017; Pence Wolf et al., 2012). However, it is crucial for counseling programs to find ways to deliver wellness across the curriculum so that counseling students can improve their well-being and learn about wellness as a way to prepare them for the challenges of the profession (Pence Wolf et al., 2012). Relatedly, findings from several studies

supported the use of abbreviated or co-curricular learning experiences (i.e., learning experiences occurring outside of, but complementary to, the standard counseling curriculum) to help counseling students learn about wellness (Burck et al., 2014; Keller-Dupree et al., 2017; Pence Wolf et al., 2012; Pence Wolf et al., 2014). These authors concurrently acknowledged that more research is needed on how to infuse wellness into counselor training. As Burck et al. (2014) aptly suggested about wellness practices, “There is always room for growth” (p. 47). Accordingly, the intent of our study was to expand these findings by studying counseling students’ experiences of learning about wellness guided by the Indivisible Self (Myers & Sweeney, 2004), during their participation in co-curricular experiential activities throughout an academic year.

The Indivisible Self

Myers and Sweeney (2004) developed the Indivisible Self, an evidence-based model, to provide cohesive meaning to wellness in the counseling field. Hattie, Myers, and Sweeney (2004) validated the model via a large database of studies. The Indivisible Self by Myers and Sweeney (2004) contained one higher-order wellness factor, five second-order factors (i.e., Essential, Creative, Coping, Social, and Physical Selves) with 17 elements, and contextual variables. Specifically, the Essential Self included four elements: spirituality, self-care, gender identity, and cultural identity. The Creative Self included five elements: thinking emotions, control, positive humor, and work. The Coping Self encompassed realistic beliefs, stress management, self-worth, and leisure. The Social Self is comprised of friendship and love. The Physical Self is comprised of exercise and nutrition. The Indivisible Self can be used as a foundation for counseling graduate students to provide strengths-based and theoretically grounded counseling interventions (Myers & Sweeney, 2004).

The Indivisible Self (Myers & Sweeney, 2004) has received more attention as a theoretical model for incorporating wellness practices into counseling, as early as during graduate training (i.e., Barden et al., 2015; Pence Wolf et al., 2012; Pence Wolf et al, 2014). Specifically, Pence Wolf et al. (2014) incorporated a wellness program focusing on introducing self-care activities based upon the Indivisible Self to graduate students over the course of a semester. Participants reported increased understanding and practices of wellness. In another study conducted by Thompson et al. (2018), yoga was incorporated at various times with graduate students, which led to a statistically significant increase in the social aspects of the Individual Self for participants when compared to those who did not participate in yoga. Lastly, Ohrt et al. (2015) implemented a wellness intervention over one semester to half of the counseling students who were in their practicum and internship courses. No significant differences in their wellness scores were found between the students who received the wellness interventions compared to the students who did not receive the wellness interventions. However, all students showed increased emotional exhaustion scores in the one semester of clinical practice. As a result of this finding, Ohrt et al. (2015) discussed the importance of infusing self-care to students over a longer period of time to benefit from the practices. This finding is important in considering learning about wellness and related practices as an ongoing process.

Purpose of the Study

Wellness activities, especially those guided by a theoretical framework such as the Indivisible Self, have been used by researchers as a framework to guide implementing wellness activities within a group setting (Pence Wolf, et al., 2014). Other researchers examined the impact of wellness activities on various aspects of counseling students' well-being over the course of a semester (Ohrt et al., 2015; Pence Wolf et al., 2014) and specific activities (i.e., yoga) at various

times (Thompson et al., 2018). To expand the work of the aforementioned researchers, the purpose of our study was to understand students' learning experiences related to their participation in a series of wellness activities implemented in a co-curricular group setting during one academic year, all of which were guided by the Indivisible Self (Myers & Sweeney, 2004). We believed exploring students' lived learning experiences about wellness would be useful to both graduate counseling students and counselor education and supervision programs because wellness is a central concept within the profession. Accordingly, to explore the merits of wellness engagement, the authors conducted a phenomenological qualitative study guided by the following research question: What are counseling students' lived experiences of learning about wellness, as guided by the Indivisible Self, when participating in co-curricular group wellness activities?

Method

A pragmatic paradigm (Morgan, 2014) guided the phenomenological qualitative study. The authors interpreted the data through a pragmatic lens, which focused on specific and applied issues being studied (Patton, 2015). In the present study, this refers to counselor education students' lived experiences of learning about wellness during wellness-focused experiential activities. The authors used a transcendental approach to phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994), which guided the research to favor participants' descriptions, versus researchers' interpretations, of lived experiences. In the following transcendental phenomenological paradigm, the authors began by first identifying, and then setting aside biases (i.e., bracketing) about the phenomenon of inquiry (Creswell, 2013), the content of which was revisited throughout data collection and analysis to minimize the influence of (i.e., researcher) bias.

We believed that gathering participants' views on their learning experiences about wellness while they participated in wellness activities would increase the intentionality, quality, and

pragmatic value of the data (Morgan, 2014), versus simply asking participants to report prior learning experiences (Patton, 2015). Thus, the authors used a qualitative approach to capture the lived experiences of counseling students who had experience with the phenomenon of inquiry.

Participants

Participants were purposefully sampled (Patton, 2015) from a Midwest University's counselor education program accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). Recruitment emails and e-brochures were disseminated to all counseling students through the program's listserv, of which 25 counseling students responded. Of the 25 counseling students who expressed initial interest, eleven ($N = 11$) met inclusion criteria and were included as participants for the study. Inclusion criteria included (a) current enrollment in the counselor education program, (b) an expressed desire to learn about incorporating wellness into personal and professional practice, (c) agreement to be observed, complete questionnaires, and participant in interviews, and (d) agreement to participate in all of the co-curricular wellness activities offered during the academic year. Participants' ages ranged from 23 to 58 years old ($M = 34$; $SD = 5$). The sample included nine females and two males; eight participants identified as White, one as African American, one as Latinx, and one as multiracial. All participants were attending graduate school full-time; three were on the school counseling track; eight were on the clinical mental health counseling track. Finally, five of the 11 participants were in the internship phase of their program.

Setting and Activities

To guide construction and implementation, 13 wellness activities were selected by the first author and linked to one of the five second-order factors contained in the Indivisible Self (Myers & Sweeney, 2004). Brief descriptions of the activities are described in Table 1. All of the wellness

activities were structured and led by the first author and each activity was implemented within a group setting on campus during one academic year. For each of the group sessions, participants engaged in one of the 13 wellness activities. Before the start of each wellness activity, the first author distributed materials, provided an explanation of the activity, and described how the activity related to one of the five factors in the model. Next, the first author facilitated the starting and stopping of the activity. Each of the wellness activities were implemented within a group session that lasted 30-60 minutes, which included a debriefing discussion led by the first author and participants completing a semi-structured questionnaire. The second author observed all activities, but did not participate, interfere, or ask questions while students were engaged in the process (i.e., functioned as a non-participant observer; Patton, 2015).

Data Collection

After receiving permission from the University's Institutional Review Board and in accordance to research standards of the profession (i.e., American Counseling Association, 2014), the first author obtained consent and demographic information from participants prior to their engagement in the wellness activities. Counseling graduate students were able to engage in the wellness activities if they chose not to provide data or discontinued the study at any time. However, none of the 11 participants dropped out of the study.

Focus groups and semi-structured questionnaires were used to obtain participants' experiences of learning about wellness during the experiential activities. The authors chose focus group interviews to capitalize on the interactions among participants, especially when gathering perspectives on learning that occurred in a group setting (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, the focus groups prompted further learning as participants generated new knowledge, and as a result, further enhanced the quality of the data (Patton, 2015). Therefore, two focus groups were conducted by

the second author; one mid-year, and one at the end of the academic year, after participants had completed all of the wellness activities. Each focus group lasted about one and a half hours. In the focus groups, participants expanded their responses to the four questions in the semi-structured questionnaire listed below, provided overall impressions, and specific examples of how their participation in the experiential group activities affected their learning about the construct of wellness. Each focus group provided opportunities for all participants to respond to the four questions and continued until all participants had no new information to contribute to the discussion (i.e., data saturation; Creswell, 2013).

In addition to focus groups, the first author obtained de-identified semi-structured questionnaires from each of the ($N = 11$) participants after each of the experiential wellness activities. This was done to obtain individual perspectives, provide participants with anonymity, and give participants opportunities to describe their experiences; in particular, for those who were less likely to speak up in the focus groups (Patton, 2015). The semi-structured questionnaire contained the primary research question (1) and three sub questions (2 – 4) as follows:

1. Describe your overall experience of learning about wellness during the experiential activities.
2. Describe how the experiential activities contributed to your understanding of wellness.
3. Describe what you learned about your wellness strengths and challenges.
4. Describe any other reflections or thoughts about the experience.

The two focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed by the second author. Verbatim transcripts along with and semi-structured questionnaires were used for data analysis. All data were securely stored in a locked file cabinet in the first author's office.

Table 1*Indivisible Self Experiential Wellness Activities*

Indivisible Self Second-Order Factor	Wellness Activity Brief Description	Supporting Reference
Essential Self	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Engaged in filling your bucket activities 2. Constructed self-mantras 	<p>Young, M. E., & Hutchinson, T. S. (2012). The rediscovery of gratitude: Implications for counseling practice. <i>Journal of Humanistic Counseling</i>, 51(1), 99-113. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1939.2012.000080.x</p>
Creative Self	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Engaged in tactile (putty) calming activities 2. Completed mindful minute activities 3. Constructed glitter calming jars 	<p>Margolin, I., Pierce, J., & Wiley, A. (2011). Wellness through a creative lens: Mediation and visualization. <i>Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought</i>, 30(3), 234-252. https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2011.587385</p>
Coping Self	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Engaged in aromatherapy for stress relief 2. Constructed self-esteem rocks 3. Engaged in imagery calming activities 	<p>Redstone, L. (2015). Mindfulness meditation and aromatherapy to reduce stress and anxiety. <i>Archives of Psychiatric Nursing</i>, 29(3), 192-193. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apnu.2015.03.001</p>
Social Self	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strengthened healthy personal relationships 2. Shared gratitude and social connections with other professionals 3. Engaged in responsible social media usage for counseling professionals 	<p>Lanham, M. E., Rye, M. S., Rimsky, L. S., & Weill, S. R. (2012). How gratitude relates to burnout and job satisfaction in mental health professionals. <i>Journal of Mental Health Counseling</i>, 34(4), 341-354. https://doi.org/10.17744/mehc.34.4.w35g80w11kgpgn26</p>
Physical Self	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Engaged in a commitment to healthy eating 2. Engaged in yoga for self-care practices 	<p>Dixon, W. A., Mauzey, E. D., & Hall, C. R. (2003). Physical activity and exercise: Implications for counselors. <i>Journal of Counseling & Development</i>, 81(4), 502-505. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2003.tb00278.x</p>

Data Analysis

Phenomenological data analysis steps were used for this study in accordance with Moustakas (1994). Data analysis began with the second author carefully reviewing focus group transcripts and semi-structured questionnaires. The data was checked for accuracy, clarity and relevance to the research question. All significant statements (i.e., verbatim quotes, sentences, or phrases) aligning with the research questions were highlighted in the data, which was done for each participant (Creswell, 2013). Moustakas (1994) called this process horizontalization, meaning each significant statement that is selected is considered initially relevant to participants' experiences of the phenomenon. Simultaneously, redundant, irrelevant, and fragmented statements not related to the research question were eliminated prior to the next step of data analysis. Next, the second author identified significant statements that shared meaning (i.e., meaning units) and clustered those meaning units into groups (Moustakas, 1994). Meaning units were then collated by the first author for each participant and used as the basis to develop the textural (i.e., what is the phenomenon for each participant) and structural (i.e., in what context or how does the phenomenon unfold for participants) descriptions of the phenomenon. Then, the second author aggregated shared textural and structural meaning across participants based on similarities in textural and structural aspects of experience, the final description of which Moustakas (1994) called the essence of the phenomenon. Thus, the results of this study were organized into three themes containing collective textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon and containing participants' verbatim quotes to better contextualize the findings.

Trustworthiness

Three strategies were employed to increase the trustworthiness of the study: (1) bracketing and monitoring researcher biases throughout the study, (2) using multiple data sources (focus

groups and semi-structured questionnaire responses), and (3) conducting two member checks with participants during data analysis. As the first and second authors bracketed their beliefs related to the study, it was conjectured that using co-curricular group activities to facilitate students' learning about wellness helped students increase their knowledge of wellness concepts grounded in research, removed the pressure of performing for a grade or points as expected in a typical course, and helped students develop wellness skills for personal and professional applications. Additionally, the authors did not want students to feel obligated to report socially desirable learning experiences based on receiving a grade, thus they utilized a co-curricular setting. Data from focus group interview transcripts, participants' semi-structured questionnaires, and the second author's observation notes were triangulated to support the presence of common experiences within and across participants. Themes needed to be present in at least two sources to be selected as an invariant experience at the individual and collective levels during data analysis. Finally, member checks were conducted with participants to increase data trustworthiness. The authors reviewed textural and structural descriptions with participants to assure that they reflected accurate summaries of their collective experiences, including a member check with participants about the relevance of the final set of themes. The second author shared the final themes with participants for verification before completing the final written description of their lived experiences.

Results

Participants' collective experiences of learning about wellness were organized into three themes: (1) *Wellness Considerations*, (2) *Wellness Connections*, and (3) *Wellness Applications*. The three themes are described below. Verbatim texts supporting affirmative and null experiences were included to appropriately contextualize the data (Creswell, 2013).

Wellness Considerations

All participants ($N = 11$) identified that partaking in the co-curricular wellness activities provided an immediate sense of relief from daily stressors. In fact, the activities aptly described by one participant, allowed students to better “consider and understand their sources of stress...identify their triggers,” and identify “what to do with those triggers.” Immediate effects of wellness activities were also described as helping students “find ways to consider how to release stress and get my mind off classes,” allowing students “to reflect on current stressors and let them go,” and in general, just getting a “break from a busy day.” Overall, participants reported that directly engaging in the activities, versus simply having a group discussion of wellness, deepened their understanding of wellness concepts and also generated helpful examples of wellness-informed coping strategies that can be “repeated on our own time.” Resulting coping strategies were acknowledged by participants as helpful for developing a sustainable practice of using wellness concepts in their daily lives, particularly to assist them with navigating the demands of graduate school.

In some cases, engaging in wellness activities were challenging for students, making them initially “feel a little anxious and unrested.” However, all participants eventually recognized that with continued practice the wellness activities would get easier to implement over time. Still, one participant noted having a “hard time,” which caused “more stress than needed” due to the technical requirements of the activity (e.g., filling a balloon with sand to create stress balls during one wellness activity) until she realized she could implement the activity in her own way versus the way of her peers: “I’ve learned how these skills (activities) can be tailored to fit me as a person ...for my unique situation.”

In addition to providing immediate stress relief, wellness activities were perceived as fun by all participants. Learning and implementing wellness activities was “a struggle, but an enjoyable process.” Participants’ overall sentiment was that the resulting enjoyment from partaking in the activities were fun and helped them “enjoy the rest of the day.” One participant captured this experience best: “The wellness activities allowed a sense of playfulness to come out. It sparked conversation, which helped me realize how wellness is not some removed idea from my daily life.” Overall, participants collectively agreed that the enjoyment of participating in the wellness activities could be useful for peers-to-peer interactions, which were commonly reported as a way to “cope with the stress” of being in a graduate program. Although the relief and fun experienced was at the individual level, it was also evident in participants’ accounts of their learning that wellness was not a solitary process, in fact, the group setting was viewed by participants as helpful for facilitating the experiences.

Wellness Connections

As all participants engaged in the experiential wellness activities, they identified benefits from peer interactions and the social process of engaging in activities as a group. Specifically, it was the process of “getting together with other graduate students,” combined with partaking in the wellness activities that “felt good.” Because of interacting with others before, during, and after partaking in the wellness activities, participants reported seeing the “similarities and differences” among peers’ understanding of the wellness activities. This notion was further illustrated by one participant: “Sharing the different interpretations of the activities in the moment with each other was the best part, actually. Seeing how we may be different from hearing the same thing.” Essentially, participants noted they received immediate feedback from each other, which better helped them to recognize variations in how wellness concepts were interpreted by others and how

they were applied to practice. Immediate feedback provided opportunities for learning about others' perspectives on wellness, which helped participants to "be more reflective," get new ideas," and "validate" their own knowledge about the concept. Participants noted that group discussions also included how they used the wellness activities "in daily life," and how they better understood the "sources of stress" as a result of participation in the activity *and* the subsequent group discussion.

All participants observed it was difficult to make time to practice wellness strategies, a challenge that lessened through group participation. One participant explained that "built in time for these (wellness) practices outside of class has been extremely helpful." The participant went on to explain that the activities helped "me realize how necessary and simple these practices can really be." Wellness activities implemented during co-curricular events was seen by participants as an opportunity to "connect with one another and build a more solid group cohesion" among members. Participants reported that although wellness activities were "self-directed," the group experience was validating and reinforced their learning experience. Finally, in addition to being immediately helpful, wellness activities were viewed by participants as helpful for future self-care and professional endeavors.

Wellness Applications

All participants recognized the potential application of wellness activities for personal self-care. One participant illustrated that "I can take something away from each activity," and like many of her peers "learn how these skills can be tailored" to fit a person's self-care needs. Participants remarked that in addition to learning coping strategies, the wellness activities sparked an interest for them to "seek wellness information and pursue implementation" of related self-care activities outside of regular classes. Participants further noted wellness activities provided information and

resources for helping them continue implementing current, and also pursuing additional, self-care activities. Several participants noted that despite acquiring “a lot of knowledge and resources related to improving health and wellness,” consistent follow through and practice was required beyond a single wellness activity. Others believed that certain self-care strategies ought to be addressed before incorporating additional options, as one participant described: “I still need more growth in physical wellness and remaining dedicated to continually doing these activities rather than really focusing on trying new ones.” Overall, participants were able to identify strengths and particular “areas for improvement” such as the physical wellness domain. Participants indicated they needed to continue working on “several wellness areas,” which was revealed to them through participation in the co-curricular activities.

In general, participants realized the benefits and challenges of incorporating self-care strategies, inspired by participation in the wellness activities, into their respective lives. As one participant candidly noted, “not only has participating in the wellness activities been a rewarding process, but researching wellness activities has been extremely educational” for, among other reasons, purposes of “self-care.” One participant remarked on the experiential learning process saying that the practicality of the wellness learning experience “parallels that of group counseling and that of professional leadership teams” which allowed participants to learn self-care strategies “helpful for us and as a way for us to support each other and affirm that we are a team unit.”

In addition to the self-care applications of learned wellness activities, all participants identified professional applications of wellness activities to current or future clients. One participant who was seeking a master’s degree in clinical mental health counseling with an interest in integrating art therapy, remarked: “I can use these activities with artists or children who need some visuals to go along with processing their thoughts and feelings.” Another participant echoed

“I want to use this activity with clients at my job, I even have a specific individual in mind,” And still another identified that “these (wellness) activities gave me another option/activity to use with students at my school.” Some participants realized that wellness activities can be applied to oneself in the work setting versus applying strategies directly with clients, for example:

It reminded me to engage in positive self-talk during difficult or stressful times at work and contributed to overall wellness while at work. It also allowed me to focus on my professional goals of productivity on specific projects instead of ruminating over unnecessary worries.

Ultimately, participants identified that participation in wellness activities helped them achieve the goal of increasing knowledge and skills related to self-care and wellness, with the added benefit of applying the learning to personal and professional settings. According to one participant, engaging in these activities allowed them to increase knowledge and skills while also providing “practical tools to continue wellness practice in other environments.” According to another participant, wellness activities “taught the importance of wellness concepts and self-care,” beyond activities that simply “help relieve stress.” In summary, participants recognized the potential personal and professional applications of wellness, which they all agreed was reinforced “in the company of others,” and without the “pressure” of formal evaluations such as those attached to a course.

Discussion

Findings in this study illustrated participants’ lived experiences of learning about wellness guided by the Indivisible Self (Myers & Sweeney, 2004). Specifically, for Wellness Considerations, all participants experienced the immediate stress-relieving benefits of participating in the wellness activities. Consequently, participants noted the need for awareness

and linked their experiences of stress relief to both the sources of stress and the associated coping strategies. This awareness occurred immediately and over time for all participants. Awareness of the short-term stress associated with applying a new wellness concept occurred for participants, which they noted was similar to stress experienced during their early learning of counseling skills (e.g., counselor competencies or microskills; Buser et al., 2012; Schure et al., 2008). Similar to Burck et al. (2014) and Ohrt et al. (2015), our findings confirmed the importance of students managing their own stress throughout (i.e., short and long term) the program training and how that may eventually transfer to providing similar feedback to future clients. Because the wellness activities flowed directly from the second-order factors of the Indivisible Self (Myers & Sweeney, 2004), participants were able to link this model to their wellness practices (i.e., increasing coping skills). This is important because participants continued to refer to the model as they reflected on their specific experiences and continued or adapted the wellness strategies grounded in a consistent theoretical foundation.

For Wellness Connections, participants highlighted the importance of the social process of engaging in the wellness groups. The counselor education literature supports the importance of accountability within a community setting while engaging in wellness with others (e.g., Cummins et al., 2007; Foster, 2010). In addition, the group members each provided unique perspectives and mutual reinforcements of their learning experiences. In turn, this social process helped participants acknowledge the helpfulness of the wellness activities and connected their learning from the activities to self-care and future professional endeavors. Our findings provide support for the impact of wellness activities on promoting and maintaining graduate students' wellness (Cummins et al., 2007). Overall, theme two findings highlight the importance of counselor education

programs to provide an inclusive, co-curricular integration of self-care techniques for students to improve their well-being (Pence Wolf et al., 2012).

Theme three encompassed Wellness Applications. The experiential wellness activities provided participants with an understanding of self-care skills for future work. Specifically, once participants applied a self-care activity to self, they proceeded to discuss how the activity may be applied to a client, a finding similar to Pence Wolf et al. (2014). Additionally, participants were able to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses in applying the wellness concepts. Our findings emphasize the importance of training experiences that support counseling students directly experiencing an intervention before understanding how to apply it in a counseling situation (Schure et al., 2008). Additionally, the wellness activities provided participants with a context to build greater empathy and understanding for clients' concerns, which parallels previous research findings on the positive outcomes of infusing wellness into counseling programs (Pence Wolf et al., 2012) and counseling supervision (Lenz et al., 2014). Lastly, theme three supports the importance of self-care being a protective factor against counselor and counselor-in-training burnout (Cummins et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2007).

Overall, our findings provide support for Myers et al. (2003) recommendations to include graduate students learning about wellness throughout their graduate training. Our wellness program and activities were supplemental to classes and sponsored by the Chi Sigma Iota chapter, which lessened faculty and student time-constraints (Keller-Dupree et al., 2017). The wellness program was implemented throughout one academic year and provided participants the opportunity to learn and apply the activities to their professional endeavors over time.

Implications

Our findings provide implications for counseling graduate programs. We followed the general recommendations of Pence Wolf et al. (2012) in creating a co-curricular wellness program that introduced structured wellness activities aligned with the Indivisible Self Model of Wellness (Myers & Sweeney, 2004). Throughout the academic year, co-curricular wellness program, students were able to learn about wellness and participate in wellness activities in a supportive environment.

The co-curricular group setting throughout the academic year, provided an inclusive environment for graduate counseling students to learn about wellness. The benefits of a longer-term wellness program (Burck et al., 2014; Ohrt et al., 2015) was noted in participants in their identified themes and process of learning about wellness. Participants process of learning about wellness began with identifying sources of stress and ways to cope with the stressors (Cummins et al., 2007). Participants noted it was not a short-term learning process and appreciated the social manner of engaging in groups over time (see also Thompson et al., 2018). The group setting and related engagement provided a supportive forum for participants' unique perspectives of learning about wellness, highlighted their accountability for learning goals, and socially reinforced learning experiences. As students applied wellness to their daily lives, they reflected upon how it could be helpful for self-care with clients. As participants applied wellness to their self-care and with clients, they were able to evaluate its strengths and weaknesses, according to the situation and needs of individuals and clients. Finally, participants were held accountable for continually incorporating wellness and able to "practice" incorporating wellness into their personal and professional selves. This is a similar process to counselors learning to incorporate counseling skills (Buser et al., 2012) with clients and considers the flexible and individualized leaning needs of

adult learners; which, is particularly important considering participants will eventually need to initiate and maintain wellness strategies without the support of the peer group.

Incorporating wellness into one's practice is not just about understanding and eliminating the sources of stress. To benefit from wellness as a self-care and stress reduction strategy, participants highlighted the need to better understand wellness, the process of which occurred in a non-classroom setting. The co-curricular group setting provided a safe space without the pressures of graded requirements of the classroom, and thus participants could work at a self-pace in a peer-supported setting over the course of the academic year. It is plausible that counselor educators, students, and community practitioners may follow a similar wellness program model, as guided by the Indivisible Self (Myers & Sweeney, 2004) to collaboratively develop and offer wellness activities over time that will provide professional benefits of self-care and stress reduction. These activities may result in fostering a greater sense of connectivity to wellness practices.

Limitations and Future Research

Given this was one sample of students within a program, participants' experiences may differ from counseling students located in other regions of the United States. Participants in the study were mostly white and female and did not represent the views of counseling students with cultural identities differing from the current sample. Future studies could include purposeful samples of culturally diverse students. Additionally, the authors gathered perspectives on participants' learning pertaining to one set of wellness activities, and not their perspectives on wellness in general. Therefore, our findings pertained to perspectives on those activities within one particular setting.

Future studies could investigate the use of co-curricular wellness activities in their own setting and over multiple settings with diverse samples of students in other regions across the

United States. Researchers could select one or two particular activities and standardize them to see if there are similar outcomes using single-case or multiple single case design approaches. Future studies may want to focus on determining the outcome of wellness activities implemented in community agencies and school settings with counseling professionals, clients, and diverse groups of individuals. This may include gathering pre- and post- test data on individuals' scores of the Five Factor Wellness Inventory (Myers & Sweeney, 2014) to determine how wellness interventions over time increased their wellness scores, and if so, in which of the Indivisible Self factors. Additionally, it would be helpful to study whether the wellness paradigm affects clients and student stress reduction and burnout.

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