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## The Professional Identity Development of Counseling Students During Extreme Stressors: Lessons Learned in the COVID-19 Pandemic

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# The Professional Identity Development of Counseling Students During Extreme Stressors: Lessons Learned in the COVID-19 Pandemic

## Abstract

Based on Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework and current literature, we discussed the impact of the COVID-19 crisis may have shaped the professional identity development (PID) of counseling students and the ecosystems of counselor education. While the discipline recognizes the importance of paying attention to counseling students' PID, the discourse on the topic in the context of extreme environmental stressors such a pandemic appears to be lacking. We discussed in this paper the opportunity the COVID-19 pandemic has presented to counselor educators and supervisors (CES) to frame extreme challenging moments like theses as times to facilitate the strengthening and internalizing of counselor profession identity among counseling trainees. We further shared lessons learned as CES and offered suggestions to various stakeholders in counselor education for consideration. We concluded the paper by exploring implications, technological possibilities, and research possibilities in counselor training.

## Keywords

counselor education, COVID-19, Bronfenbrenner's theory, master's-level counseling students, professional identity development

## Author's Notes

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The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way most, if not all, counselor educators and supervisors (CES) in the United States teach, train, and develop counseling students as it has drastically altered the world of education. The risks and restrictions associated with the pandemic have forced classroom instructions and clinical training to remote delivery with limited in-person learning across the country since spring 2020. Though prior to 2020 online counselor education programs had been on a dramatic rise (Snow et al., 2018), on-campus training remained the dominant mode of learning. With a pandemic-related, large-scale switchover to online learning, students and CES may begin to wonder how the drastic, involuntary adaptation to full-scale online learning and telehealth services has impacted counseling training, particularly the professional identity development (PID) of counseling students.

While the United States has every reason to believe that life will return to “normal” however normal may be defined, as vaccination becomes readily available even with the uncertainty of COVID-19 variants, online learning will remain vibrant, permanent, and ever more abundant in a post-COVID-19 world (Tesar, 2020), including online counselor education. In this paper, we invite counselor education stakeholders to consider how this accelerated, macro-scale change has likely impacted the ecosystem of counselor education in general, and the PID of counseling trainees in particular. We hope to encourage counselor education stakeholders to proactively and holistically address the impact the COVID-19 crisis may have exerted on the PID of counseling students. We believe the present pandemic experience can be harnessed by CES to inform their efforts in helping trainees to foster reflexivity, responsiveness, and resilience in the face of a mega health and environmental threat as integral qualities of their character and professional identity.

Because of its holistic perspective, we choose to frame our discussion based on Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecology model. We will further offer recommendations at each systemic level in efforts to scaffold the PID of counseling students during such unprecedented times. We believe trainees would also benefit from engaging in this discourse. We begin by briefly outlining Bronfenbrenner's model of human development and discussing professional identity and its importance to master's-level counseling students. We choose to focus our thoughts on master's-level students because doctoral level counseling students' developmental trajectory and needs are substantively different and would benefit separate focused conversations on their own merits.

### **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory**

Bronfenbrenner's (1994) theory is a popular model that recognizes the impact of ecosystemic factors related to the person, context, process, and time in human growth and development. The model emphasized that individuals' development cannot be understood without considering their ecology. Scholars in the helping and educational fields have used this model to understand the role systemic factors play on a trainee's development. For example, Lau and Ng (2014) apply it to conceptualize the training environment of counselor trainees. We contend that the theory provides a holistic framework for comprehending systemic influences on the PID of counseling students.

Bronfenbrenner (1994) posited the existence of five nested systems in which an individual interacts with the environment and develops: *microsystem*, *mesosystem*, *exosystem*, *macrosystem*, and *chronosystem*. At the center of this theory are the biological and psychological traits of the developing individual. Microsystem refers to the contextual variables that directly influence the individual, for example, a student's relationships with their professors and family members. Mesosystem is defined as "the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings

containing the developing person” (p. 40), for example, the relationship between the graduate counseling program and the internship site with which a student is directly affiliated. Exosystem is defined as “the processes and linkages taking place between two or more settings, at least one of which does not contain the developing person, but in which events occur that indirectly influence processes within the immediate setting in which the developing person lives” (p. 40). An example of an exosystem factor is the relationship between the advisor of a student and the advisors’ family with whom the student does not have direct contact.

Macrosystem consists of greater social and cultural influences that can impact counseling programs including social distancing and normalization of online learning as a result of public health mandates and social adaptation due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Chronosystem as applied to the context of counseling training refers to “the sociohistorical conditions of counselors’ training and reflects temporal changes and patterns of the counseling and related professions and the environment through time” (Lau & Ng, 2014, p. 432). The time element is present across all systems such as the developmental stages of students and the duration involved in developing a mentoring relationship with an advisor. The developmental stress related to a prolonged period of uncertainty, personal, and professional losses in a pandemic or regional disaster (e.g., hurricanes and wildfires) could be considered chronosystemic impact in a counseling trainee’s developmental trajectory. While a person’s development is multidimensional, the present paper focuses on master’s-level counseling students’ professional sense of self.

### **Professional Identity and its Importance**

The development of one’s professional identity is an ongoing process that facilitates an emergent understanding of one’s identity in a profession; and it requires a growth mindset in the person (Dweck, 2007). Puglia (2008) describes counselor professional identity as “comprised by

three components: agreement with counseling philosophy, beliefs that the counseling profession includes activities such as becoming trained and certified, and professional engagement” (p. 13). In this paper, the PID of counseling students refers to the preparation of both personal characteristics and professional training over their lifelong career in counseling (Gazzola & Smith, 2007; Nugent & Jones, 2009).

A discourse on profession identity is of great import to counselors and counselor education. First, with a strong counselor professional identity, counselors can distinguish themselves from other similar careers (Healey & Hays, 2012), reduce role confusion (Dobrow & Higgins, 2005), and may prevent unethical counseling practices and avoid harming clients (Gibson et al., 2010). Second, the national training model mandates a defined professional identity framework in the training of counselors (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2015). Third, a unified professional identity strengthens the profession’s social recognition, creates market demands, and facilitates licensure portability across states in the country (Gale & Austin, 2003).

We further see a need to discuss the PID of master’s-level counseling students during the current, unprecedented COVID-19 crisis that has structurally changed the practice and training of counselors from a mostly in-person mode to a primary reliance on web-based modalities. Such discourse invites counselor trainers to consider developing situationally responsive teaching, advising, and mentoring strategies to scaffold the development of novice counselors. We believe that examining PID during a pandemic can contribute knowledge to support the growth of the counseling profession during a time that is existentially threatening to individuals and communities. In the following, we will discuss some major impact of COVID-19 on master’s-level counseling trainees’ development at various levels and offer recommendations.

## **Physical and Psychological Impacts of COVID-19 on Students**

The physical and psychological impacts of the pandemic on the general population range from minor inconveniences to deadly consequences (e.g., restrictions from recreational activities, working and attending school from home, interrupted access to health care services, loss of livelihood, mental health distress, and severe COVID infection and related death. These impacts, however, are not experienced equally across individuals, people groups, and communities. For example, people living in poverty, the racially disadvantaged, people with disability, and those with pre-existing health conditions have been more severely impacted than their more advantaged counterparts (Kantamneni, 2020). It is reasonable to expect such differential impact also applies to counseling students. Based on our observations as CES and of relevant literature, we want to highlight several physical and psychological impacts and discuss how CES can address such impact on students' professional development with their students.

The foremost threat of the pandemic is a higher-than-normal health risk, particularly to older people and those with pre-existing underlying health conditions (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Such risk directly impacts students who may contract the disease and become asymptomatic and contagious unbeknownst to them, suffer mild symptoms, or experience extreme health complications. Students may also suffer loss of income, food, and shelter security due to the prolonged economic disruption and uncertainty (Reis & Grady, 2020). Such impacts have inevitably led to some students having to drop out of school, take a leave of absence, or slow down their plan of study. Some students also experienced additional financial burden (Son et al., 2020) due to the switchover to online learning. Such burden includes the need to access to technology that was not necessary when learning was done on campus (Lederer et al., 2020).

The pandemic precipitated a crisis for students with threats and sudden changes in their physical world, that they have had to respond and adapt to immediately and involuntarily. Anecdotal and initial research data indicate that these physical and environmental challenges have resulted in students experiencing high levels of psychological distress, for example, depression and anxiety (Aristovnik et al., 2020) and decreased concentration on learning and motivation to complete their training (Zaccoletti et al., 2020). For many minoritized students in the United States, it has become apparent that their psychological wellbeing has been impacted more severely because of pre-existing financial and social vulnerabilities that have now been exacerbated by the pandemic (Son et al., 2020) and concurrent large-scale racial uprisings happening in the country in 2020 alongside a very contentious national election cycle (Roche & Jacobson, 2019). Furthermore, students whose preferred learning style is in the typical face-face classroom setting, students with lack of financial resources or who have no access to quiet, private spaces, and students who were forced to adjust to online learning quickly experienced psychological distress (Neuwirth et al., 2020). Students who have vulnerability due to personal trauma history may also experience increased psychological distress during such times of rapid adjustment, social isolation, health threats, economic loss, and so forth (Hamam et al., 2021). Further, students who are serving clients who are impacted by the pandemic in their field placement experience may sustain vicarious traumatization (Aafjes-van Doorn et al., 2020).

Not only trainees are going through unprecedented and challenging times, CES themselves are also experiencing physical and psychological impacts because of the pandemic, concurrent socio-political challenges, and concurrent regional disasters (e.g., wildfires, hurricanes, and flooding). We contend that moments like these are opportune times in which CES can apply themselves as an instrument to turn this critical moment into a professional development



opportunity for their students. We believe that CES can work with their students to collaboratively construct meaning for themselves as to who and what a professional counselor is in times of extreme uncertainty, severe threats, and drastic macro changes.

For example, CES can consider including pandemic-related course content and learning activities that facilitate critical examination of counselors' philosophical orientations, roles, functions, and skills. CES can intentionally make time and create spaces in their teaching and advising for students to process their personal and unique experiences with the impact of the pandemic and connect them to the importance of self-reflection, self-care, resilience, resourcefulness, humility, empathy, and so forth—all the characteristics that are highly prized in a counselor professional identity (Kahn, 2001; Kottler, 2003). Activities that can help achieve these learning outcomes include, but are not limited to, reflexivity, journaling, and broaching skills with clients who are differentially impacted by the pandemic because of their minoritized social statuses, and service-learning projects that serve vulnerable populations during the pandemic. Such learning and development go beyond textbook information acquisition; it is experiential, personal, and social justice oriented. We believe intentional and targeted teachable moments and supervision experiences have greater scaffolding impact on a student's professional development (Bernard & Goodyear, 2018).

### **Impact of COVID-19 on Students' Microsystems**

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the myriads of immediate social relationships of a counseling student. For example, it has interrupted the faculty-student relationship while creating new opportunities as well (Reis & Grady, 2020). In-person faculty advising were limited in some academic environments and students and faculty are now mainly using technology to stay informed and engaged (Hu, 2020). Unfortunately, students who are in financial hardships or with racial

disparities may now experience greater limitations in accessing quality digital services and technology to allow them to receive advisement and support from their faculty and academic programs (Gonzales et al, 2018). Students and faculty may also experience “Zoom fatigue” due to the increased use of video conferencing meetings which may drain one’s attention and make any meetings more exhausting (Fosslien & Duffy, 2020). The changes to the faculty-student relationship are likely confounded by the stressors experienced by both students and faculty. These stressors may include increased caregiving and homeschooling responsibilities some students and faculty have to take on due to closure of school facilities and stay-home orders.

Prior to COVID-19, most relationships between faculty and students were primarily focused on students’ academic needs. Since then, COVID-19 has created new opportunities for students and faculty to cross boundaries and roles in their relationships. Faculty and students working remotely or using video conferencing software may now see their counterparts at their home or personal workspace (Reis & Grady, 2020). For example, they can see each other’s home life and loved ones, pets, or roommates interrupting during the faculty-student interactions. Students may also reach out for help and support outside of academic advising as they navigate the challenges of COVID-19 with their academic and personal life needs. These needs would likely be compounded for minoritized students, particularly students of color, because of the concurrent happenings of racial uprisings and Black Life Matters advocacy.

The pandemic has further impacted counseling students’ relationships with their fellow students due to structural changes in the learning environment, particularly those who have to transition from on-campus learning to online learning (Asfaw et al., 2020). For example, students in on-campus programs can no longer count on their regular in-person interactions with peers for support, co-construction of knowledge, and professional socialization. Given that every person in

the class has been impacted by the pandemic and their personal stress and challenges may be in the way for them to be present and invested in building relationships with fellow students. Conversely, in moments like these, students can develop a greater appreciation for the need to cultivate relationships with peers for emotional and academic support. We believe such moments can instill in students an appreciation of and commitment to peer support and collaboration as vital to personal and professional functioning.

We contend that the challenges resulting from an unprecedented pandemic and its intersection with a concurrent moment of political and social reckoning have opened up new opportunities for faculty to role model to their trainees the professional behaviors, attitudes, and values that are most cogent to crisis moments through proximal processes presented to them in a learning environment in a prolonged pandemic. For example, CES can demonstrate reflexivity, flexibility, safety, and professionalism when interacting with students in online classes and advising activities. Counseling trainers' willingness to work hard to create responsive learning spaces and opportunities should further demonstrate to their trainee's professionalism that stands the test of crisis. Working with students to develop assignments with relevancy and currency and allowing for assignment due date flexibility are among the many things CES can use to model to students the aforementioned professional qualities.

In the context of the present discourse, we deem it necessary to note that for those counseling students who are in field placements, their microsystems include their relationships with their clients. COVID-19 business operation restrictions necessitated a sudden transition to telehealth platforms to conduct counseling services in most places in the United States, including schools, colleges, and counseling offices. This, inevitably, has resulted in students needing to adjust in their work with counseling clients in an environment that most of them are not formally

prepared for. As such, it was common to hear students reporting emotional distress and physical difficulties in their efforts to adjust to this new “normal” as their field placement sites were trying to transition into providing online services. Notwithstanding the challenges, we believe that such a drastic transition actually presents a great opportunity for counseling students to develop work skills needed for a counselor to navigate a transition during critical times and counseling skills that are responsive and amenable to online counseling as well as those less suitable to online counseling.

The pandemic-accelerated massive reliance on telehealth has led the medical and counseling communities to believe that telehealth will not only increase in familiarity and popularity, but it will also become a major mode of service delivery format in the post-COVID world (Shah et al., 2020). We recommend CES, stakeholders in the counseling field, and counseling students to intentionally explore the impact of COVID-19 and author their own professional identity and practice in the age of online counseling that has been exponentially expedited by COVID-19. It is totally conceivable that many counseling programs will begin to offer specialized training in online counseling from here on. We further advocate for CACREP and CES program to ensure greater curricular inclusion to ethically and effectively prepare trainees to provide virtual services.

### **Impact of COVID-19 on Students’ Mesosystems**

In the case of counseling students, we would like to highlight several aspects of their mesosystems that bear direct relevance to their training to illustrate how the pandemic might have impacted the quality and dynamic of their immediate social networks. First, the implementation of social distancing and transition to online learning in higher education have impacted the social networks and behaviors of students (Lederer et al., 2020). For example, students were prohibited

to participate in large gatherings, attend extracurricular activities, and collaborate with one another in close proximity. Such restrictions and changes have inevitably interrupted the peer engagement processes and venues that students in face-to-face learning environments would usually use to create and foster group cohesion, emotional atmosphere, and camaraderie that contribute to learning and development. With increased COVID-related stress and life challenges experienced by every student, we have observed that many students found it more challenging to have the time and energy to engage with peers like they normally would during non-crisis times.

Research indicates that a collaborative and collegial learning environment contributes to student learning and development (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2013). Hence, we recommend that CES, who had to rely heavily on online learning during the pandemic, to consider promptly adopting diverse andragogy strategies that are appropriate for online learning to promote student engagement, peer interactions, and vicarious learning (Neuwirth et al., 2020). Such strategies (e.g., breakout room sessions, video-based assignments using interactive apps) would provide spaces and opportunities for their students to observe and witness how their peers engage and support each other as counselors. Counseling supervisors may also consider adapting the reflecting team method (Chang, 2010) to their synchronous supervision sessions to mimic the physical two-way mirror setting by having observers turning off their cameras while the supervisor processes with one of their fellow supervisees who is presenting a recorded counseling session. These observers will then turn on their cameras when the time comes for them to provide reflections while the supervisory dyad turns off their cameras to listen in on the reflections. My (Author 2) experience using it in an online internship class shows that, with some forethought, the method can be modified for use virtually.

Vicarious learning (Bandura, 1962) will help students internalize valuable professional dispositions modeled by their peers, instructors, and supervisors. A collegial environment will also provide a safe environment for students to be brave to give and receive feedback and support (Brown, 2019). Peer relationships can also help students establish a working bond and professional networking that can extend beyond graduation.

Other mesosystemic variables that bear significance in students' professional development include the working relationships among faculty members and those between the counseling program and students' field placement personnel. The pandemic has ushered into higher education many administrative and relational challenges (Ali, 2020). For example, program administrative staff, instructional faculty, and practicum and internship site supervisors suddenly have to manage physical and logistical changes due to the pandemic-related social and work restrictions. These changes and challenges required training program personnel and site personnel to be responsive and efficient in their collaborative efforts to help students quickly and efficiently establish reasonable stability to navigate their academic, physical, and emotional challenges.

The pandemic has challenged higher education in its communication with various stakeholders, namely, faculty, staff, students, and other entities during moments of crisis and natural disasters. Piotrowski and King (2020) highlighted "the need for coordination of response and recovery in the aftermath of natural disasters" (p. 61-62) while Knight (2020) discussed the necessity of clear, truthful, and empathetic communication from university and program leadership. From this perspective, we believe that students would benefit professionally if training programs were to also involve student input in efforts to respond to programmatic challenges and ensure clear communication and collaboration among various stakeholders. Effective working relationships among stakeholders further demonstrate to counseling students the importance of

collegiality, collaboration, and effective communication in the counseling profession that involves multiple stakeholders and is best operated with a systemic approach to ensure operation efficiency.

### **Impact of COVID-19 on Students' Exosystems**

While the influences of exosystemic factors on the development of counseling students may not seem obvious, we believe highlighting their impact during critical times like a pandemic is useful for both trainees and trainers. For example, during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, students would likely have a greater need to look to their instructors, advisers, and supervisors for advice, mentoring, and support to help them navigate training challenges that they have never encountered before or are unequipped to handle. In moments like these, CES would draw upon the resources they have from their personal, professional, and community contacts to help meet their students' needs. For instance, CES can connect their students with human and material resources in their social networks to which their students do not have direct access. CES can also tap into resources their institutions and professional affiliations (e.g., the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision, the American School Counseling Association) offer and channel them to their students, for example, pandemic response resources and tuition assistance.

In one of my (Author 2) group advising sessions, I invited an alumnus to join the session to hold a Question-and-Answer session with my advisees. I had also invited two international counseling leaders to a leadership webinar I co-organized with students during the pandemic for these international leaders to share how counselors were part of the solution advocating for mental health services in their communities during the pandemic. Experiences such as these illustrate how CES can harness the opportunity the pandemic has presented to counselor development in a digital age. Additionally, I (Author 1), invited mental health colleagues and former counseling students to my classes to discuss their experience and answer students' questions regarding course-related

topics. Students welcomed the opportunities to interact with and learn from these guest speakers during synchronous online classes. As such, in critical moments during a pandemic, CES can introduce professional contacts through technology to enhance students' learning and development.

### **Impact of COVID-19 on Students' Macrosystems**

At the macro level, the COVID-19 pandemic has rapidly imposed a global, cataclysmic change to humanity that has shaken up all local and global social norms and practices, including the most visible shift to online learning overnight in the education sector (Dhawan, 2020). These macro changes have not spared counselor education programs in brick-and-mortar institutions (Christian, McCarty, & Brown, 2020). Unlike programs that had already been operating primarily in an online learning environment, these programs were forced to suddenly decide how to deliver courses synchronously or asynchronously and what online learning platform to use. Given that some of the counseling skill-based courses require live interactions and role-plays, CES, who had not taught in an online environment prior to the pandemic, had to quickly improvise and learn how to navigate these fundamental changes.

The pandemic has normalized online learning (Murphy, 2020). Practically all aspects of higher education operations have gone online in most places, for example, advising, library access, and graduation since the beginning of the pandemic. This large-scale transition to online learning requires non-online students to acquaint and co-create new norms and practices. Even with an eventual resolution of the pandemic with a large-scale vaccination, we believe most of the pandemic-related structural changes will remain and delivery of counselor preparation will not return to pre-COVID-19 days; instead, the use of information technology in and demand for online counselor education, like other academic programs, will only increase and not decrease (Gallagher



& Palmer, 2020).

As CES navigated changes and collaborate with their students in creating pandemic and post-pandemic learning culture, we recommend that they employ intentionality and systemic approaches in their efforts to support and foster the PID of counseling students that embraces the macro changes the pandemic has catapulted onto the training and practice of counselors. For example, we believe that it would be responsive and responsible for training programs to provide substantive relevant training to prepare their students to provide skillful and ethical online counseling services, regardless of whether their program delivery was to return to traditional, on-campus mode or transition to online delivery. We believe CES can harness their experiences during the pandemic to help them model and build a culture of resilience and change-responsiveness among counseling students in a digital world. Furthermore, students can learn immensely from CES's role-modeling to them how personal and professional resilience looks like in times like these.

### **Impact of COVID-19 on Students' Chronosystems**

Chronosystem concerns the time element in the trajectory of development; and time is present in and cuts across all of the above-mentioned systems in a developing person. For example, relationships in a student's microsystem evolve through time and their impact on the student takes place through time. Further, the length of time a person is immersed in or exposed to an element (e.g., trauma) would be a factor to consider (Sabin-Farrell & Turpin, 2003). For the purposes of the current discourse, we would like to highlight several aspects of a counseling student's PID as it relates to their chronosystems.

First, the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the forefront the reality that critical incidents, including prolonged immersion in a traumatic experience, happen in everyone's

developmental trajectory. The pandemic presents to trainees a developmental crisis. However, the impact of such experiences does differ according to contextual variables such as a person's cultural identity and geographical location. Relatedly, the impact of crisis may also be dependent on a person's history of crisis and trauma (Pearlman & Mac, 1995). We believe the current pandemic experience, due to its prolonged uncertainty and extensive impact, will likely result in some collective trauma for the current generation besides exerting differential impact on individuals, families, communities, and nations. With this perspective, CES and counseling trainees have the opportunity to reflect, examine, and develop a dynamic and holistic view of and approach to their own personal and professional developmental trajectory that consists of both personal and collective meanings.

Additionally, while CES and trainees may be totally immersed in the crisis, and oftentimes feel overwhelmed by it, we contend that, in times like these, learning and applying crisis management skills and the idea of post-traumatic growth is apropos. Based on adult learning principles, we believe that it is possible even in online learning (Tainsh, 2016) to use current circumstances and students' experiences in the pandemic to facilitate their development of crisis management skills. Such development will equip students to work with their clients and communities that are going through similar crises. While the prolonged nature of the pandemic may add an additional layer to the challenges, students now have a protracted time to develop and hone their professional sense of self and skills. But, we believe, this can only happen with an intentional approach to counselor preparation.

### **Limitations and Implications for Future Research**

While we attempt to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on various aspects and ecosystems of the PID of masters-level students, we acknowledge that this is not an exhaustive treatment. As

CES located in the northwest region of the United States, we recognize the limitations of our discussions and recommendations to counselor education programs in other regions, countries, and socio-political environments. As such, we recommend CES and counseling students in different locales around the world to explore the uniqueness of their development in the context of local and global crisis based on their lived experiences and ecosystems.

We believe further inquiries of chronosystemic impact, like a pandemic or natural disaster, on the PID of counseling students may prove beneficial for CES' understanding of the associated challenges and opportunities that present themselves to counselors' developmental trajectory. CES and counseling students can use challenges presented by COVID-19 as an opportunity to be reflective and intentional in enriching their development and that of the counseling profession. We further encourage stakeholders in the counseling field to utilize a multisystemic approach to conceptualize the past, present, and future of the profession. As stated in our introduction, we hope our paper will encourage these stakeholders to proactively and holistically address the impact the COVID-19 crisis may have exerted on the PID of counseling students.

We believe the lessons from extreme stressors such as this pandemic can allow CES and students to demonstrate their humanity even in their professional development. For example, students and CES can welcome pets and roommates who may interrupt during synchronous online classes or create opportunities for students and CES to share challenges and appropriate personal disclosures in the classroom or during supervision. Furthermore, CES can model compassion, acceptance, empathy, and unconditional positive regard when engaging with students who are experiencing stressors and demonstrating adjustment difficulties. We believe the presence of compassionate and caring CES can provide a holding environment that encourages development of resiliency in counseling students. Lastly, we also recommend counselor education programs to

provide support in times like these that encourage the exercise of self-care among counseling students who are often on the front lines of disasters, working with clients with traumatic experiences, and experiencing vicarious trauma.

With the increasing availability of vaccines to mitigate against the threat of COVID-19, we ask that CES to begin examining the long term, post-pandemic adaptations counseling programs should make. There will be uncertainties of how each ecosystem within the counseling profession will change after the pandemic is over. We believe the impact of this pandemic creates an opportunity for CACREP, counseling associations, state licensing boards, and CES to research and revise the profession's code of ethics, regulations, and educational standards. While the challenges students face were likely to be different in type and extent locally, nationally, and globally, many of the issues and challenges discussed in this paper are shared concerns for most students in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Therefore, we recommend CES to embark on systematic investigation on the impact of the pandemic on the counseling profession and the development of counselors. CES can examine individual and systemic factors that promote PID of trainees during extreme environmentally stressful times. We also recommend qualitative studies on CES's experience in promoting PID among trainees. Finally, we recommend further studies on the impact of the PID of CES during extreme stressors.

While it is reasonable to expect a heavy utilization of online counseling to continue in a post-COVID-19 world, we also recommend counseling researchers to study client expectations for services as life transitions into post-COVID-19 era. For example, what factors influence clients' choice for in-person service or online counseling in a post-COVID-19 world? We also recommend that researchers investigate the effectiveness of training strategies in preparing counselors to render

online counseling competently, ethically, and with cultural humility.

Such research will inform counselor training and practice in a post-COVID-19 world.

### **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic represents a watershed moment, a history making moment, for present day humanity, the counseling profession included. As CES and trainees continue to navigate the challenges and opportunities of the pandemic and ponder about life in a post-pandemic world, we believe that trainees and trainers alike have strengths and skill sets to enable them to thrive in moments like these as well as the ability to proactively prepare for what lies ahead. We believe strong collaborations among stakeholders, such as CES, counseling and related mental health organizations, counselors, students, and state licensing boards, are vital for the achievement of personal, professional, and community post-traumatic growth in the future.

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