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Experiences of Engaging in Contemplative-Reflexive Practices During Practicum

Abstract

This study used a community based participatory research (CBPR) model to explore the impact contemplative practice has on Master's level counseling students while engaging in their practicum course. Four counseling students and two faculty researchers created process questions to be contemplated through a 10 week period. Results indicated that students gained self-awareness of their calm, relaxed states during contemplative practice, which contrasted to their worried and tense states when engaging in client contact hours. Over time, students were able to be reflexive in direct client contact by drawing upon the self-awareness gained through regular contemplative practice. Unintended benefits of engagement in a CBPR study and future research directions are discussed.

Keywords

contemplative practice, reflectivity, practicum course, counseling students

Author's Notes

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Reflexivity used in a counseling or consultative model is the process of incorporating the professional's personal experiences (thoughts, feelings, and reflections) to inform their therapeutic interactions or communications (Wint, 2011). Reflexivity occurs in real time after a professional has engaged in reflective work during their independent time. For example, when a professional engages in a regular contemplative practice, such as yoga or meditation, they can create a space for themselves to reflect on specific questions or circumstances. With repeated engagement in this type of practice, the professional may transform their thinking and become more self-aware when interacting with others (Etherington, 2017). This process can then lead them to be more reflexive during interactions. It was hypothesized that regular contemplative practice and reflexivity could be beneficial for counseling students as they go through their practicum experience.

In this study, four students in a Master's of Arts in Counseling Program used contemplative practices during the semester they were enrolled in their practicum course. A community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach was taken to learn the benefits of regular contemplative practice and reflection on experiences when engaging in indirect and direct client contact in their practicum placements.

Contemplative Practice

A contemplative practice is any activity that is specifically intended for quiet and personal reflection. It is an activity in which the participant is centering their mind and body on being calm and present. The importance of the chosen activity for contemplation is in the eye of the practitioner; therefore, there is no "one way" to engage in contemplative practice. Some contemplative practices are group activities, such as prayer services, vigils, yoga classes, or meditation classes. Other contemplative practices are for an individual alone, such as playing an

instrument, painting, meditating, or writing in a journal. Regardless of the contemplative practice, the goal is the same: to experience a calm, inner peace.

The origins of contemplative practice expand from diverse traditions and have their roots in religion, philosophy, and humanism. Christianity enacts prayer as a contemplative activity, putting the mind and body in a state of awareness and oneness with God's presence (e.g., Aquinas, 2006). Those who practice the philosophy of Confucianism engage in "quiet sitting," in which the practitioner thinks deeply about issues while sitting in the lotus position (e.g., Eh, 2020). Buddhists have traditions in engaging in contemplative practice through focusing on the breath. Bhikku Bodhi's *In the Buddha's Words* (2005, p. 572) states, "A person dwells contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending, and mindful, having subdued longing and dejection in regard to the world."

Contemplative practice is a discipline of the body and mind. The practice fosters the cultivation of self-awareness, non-evaluative attention, and the development of both mental and physical steadiness (Davidson & Dahl, 2016). Individuals engaging in contemplative practice strive toward greater levels of attunement, creativity, and compassion.

Contemplative practice has demonstrated many benefits that would be especially positive for counseling students. Bingaman (2011) found that individuals who engage in regular contemplative practice have less anxious perspectives on life and, in particular, interpersonal relationships. Hanley et al. (2015) found that people who engage in regular contemplative practice report higher levels of mindfulness, psychological, and subjective well-being. Maintaining mindful interactions and a personal sense of well-being are beneficial to enhance the social/psychological stamina needed to be a counselor, as well as reduce burn-out.

Reflexivity

Schon (1987) distinguishes between reflecting *on* action and reflecting *in* action. When we reflect *on* action, we use the wisdom gained from experience to think about the actions we took in the past. When we reflect *in* action, we use our acquired wisdom to help us make decisions in the moment. This is not an impulsive reaction, but rather an intentional and mindful response. Reflecting *in* action is the foundation for reflexivity in this study.

Reflexivity in counseling has been defined as an attempt to increase self-awareness to reduce bias (Schon, 1983). Reflexivity increases self-awareness in the moment (Katz et al., 2017). Esposito et al. (2019) suggest that reflexivity in the counseling session may enhance the change process during therapy. Calvert et al. (2016) assert that purposeful reflexivity in supervision can transfer into reflexivity of the counselor when working with clients in therapy.

Reflexivity in counseling research has beneficial outcomes. Alley et al. (2015) identified that practitioners of counseling can use reflexive journaling in a manner which helped them develop a more insightful view of community needs beyond what was available in research. Etherington (2017) asserts that reflexivity in counseling research enhances trustworthiness of the process.

Self as a Counselor

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) encourages student counselors to increase their own self-awareness through reflection. Counselors should be able to identify and explore factors impacting human behavior, including an understanding of their own developmental crises, functioning, and behaviors to include biological, neurological, physiological, systemic, and environmental standpoints (CACREP, 2015, 2.F.3.c; 2.F.3.e.; 2.F.3.f.). Emphasis is placed on the counselor's ability to identify strategies for personal and professional self-evaluation and implications for practice (CACREP, 2015, 2.F.1.k; 2.F.1.l).

One of the most efficacious tools a counselor will have is the ability to be self-aware. Self-awareness and reflections are ongoing processes that the counselor should be integrally engaged in.

Human growth and development is a significant aspect of the counselor's professional identity (e.g., American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014, F.8.c.). In many Master's level counseling programs, there is an emphasis on training student clinicians on use of self or "self of the therapist/counselor." Aponte (2022) highlights the following regarding the premise of training therapists on the use of self by noting:

The conscious, active, and purposeful use of self by the therapist in the therapeutic process is an essential aptitude in establishing an effective therapeutic relationship, and that this therapeutically purposeful use of self can and should be incorporated in the training of all therapists in an explicitly systematic manner. (p. 136)

Furthermore, Lum (2002) emphasizes "the development of the self of the therapist is a significant aspect of becoming an effective therapist" (p. 181). An introspection into oneself as a counselor provides counselors with opportunities to conceptualize theories of individual and family development and the impact on one's overall growth and development. Bray (2018) reminds counselors that there is no ideal plan for optimal self-care. Self-care should be ongoing and form a part of one's career-long focus in order to stay attuned to client needs as well as protect oneself from emotional burn-out. "Self as a counselor" helps counselors to be knowledgeable of the possibility of impairment by monitoring signs of their own physical, mental, or emotional problems and refrain from offering or providing professional services when impaired (ACA, 2014, C.2.d, C.2.g., F.5.b.). If counselors are not practicing self-care, they will be unable to provide competent services (ACA, 2014, C.2.d.).

Each counselor should have the ability to articulate one's development and needs across the life span. During practicum, much time is spent on exploring one's affinity towards a particular theorist, to be multiculturally responsive, and to avoid biases. Contemplative practice is one strategy that human service workers use for self-care (e.g., McGarrigle & Walsh, 2011). As such, the faculty involved in this study considered inclusion of counseling students in a community based participatory research study using contemplative practices while engaging in the practicum course to be both a model of self-care practice, as well as an avenue for insight into the experience itself.

Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR)

CBPR is a research paradigm which values the partnerships between the community being served and the researchers (Horowitz et al., 2004; Robinson et al., 2019). CBPR creates connections between scientists and communities, through the use of shared knowledge and valuable experiences (Viswanathan et al., 2004). CBPR recognizes that an empowered community is able to fully understand and act on challenges of that community (Corrigan, 2020).

The goal of CBPR is to make a positive, transformative, and sustainable change with, for, and in communities. CBPR can enhance research efforts in addressing mental health disparities in access, effectiveness, uptake, and research of treatments and programing for marginalized groups. CBPR provides an inclusive and flexible research framework that promotes cultural humility, colearning, and trust which allows for more patient-centered and pragmatic approaches to the research process (Collins et al., 2018).

Corrigan (2020) describes CBPR team members as being members of a community who have aligned goals, discussions, mutual consensus, and equal partnership. By living through the experiences and sharing in the research process, CBPR members bring problems from their

community to the research and bring solutions back to their community (Corrigan, 2020). CBPR seeks to gain a deeper understanding of a community's unique circumstances, and a more accurate framework for testing and adapting best practices to the community's needs (Viswanathan et al., 2004).

The roots of CBPR can be traced back to the “Northern” and “Southern” traditions. The Northern tradition was brought upon by Kurt Lewin. He coined the term “action research” which refers to research that solves a critical problem using community effort and social action (Collins et al., 2018). The Southern tradition of CBPR comes from South America, Africa, and Asia. This tradition came from the challenges faced in developing countries and proposed solutions. Calls were made for community action and involvement to be incorporated into more traditional research plans to avoid the monopoly on learning and knowledge that often results from top-down researcher- community relationships (Collins et al., 2018).

The expansion from using CBPR as a methodology to the use of CBPR as an approach to research was a process documented from the 1980s through the 2000s (Macaulay, 2017). Macaulay (2017) specified that the fundamental principles of participatory research were grounded in an equal partnership between the researching organization and the community throughout the entire process. Macaulay (2017) further identified a need for continual expansion of participatory research to include various types of teams (such as academics and policy makers) while continuing to monitor power dynamics and challenges within the research partnerships.

Students as Participants and Researchers in CBPR

In the current study, a community composed of two faculty members and four students in the Master’s of Arts in Counseling Program was created. The two faculty members were interested in this community as a way to strengthen the learning process for the students, while maintaining

“academic humility [so as] to recognize how their research skills can contribute but not dominate a partnership” (Macaulay, 2017, p. 258). The students were interested in this community as a way to enhance their practicum experience, increase their self-awareness, and learn more about the research process. The literature review was limited in terms of engaging students both as researchers *and* as participants. There were a few studies which engaged students as co-researchers with faculty (e.g., Bulmer et al., 2016; Woods-Jaeger et al., 2021) but few studies in which the students engaged in a faculty-student partnership as co-researchers while also self-reflecting as participants.

Jacobson and Goheen (2006) described a participatory research model whereby social work students collaborated with faculty researchers to evaluate their undergraduate program. Expanding on the work of Jacobson and Goheen, Heckel and Moore (2009) demonstrated the efficacy of community based participatory research where the research community consisted of university faculty and undergraduate social work students in an exploration of the campus alcohol policy. In their study, students received credit for an Independent Study for their work with the research (Heckel & Moore, 2009). They emphasized the need for a strong student-faculty partnership throughout the process by setting regular meeting times, including students outside of the faculty-student partnership to serve as peer reviewers of research, and maintaining a flexible mindset to be able to navigate research challenges as they arise.

Kelley (2013) shared her experience as a doctoral student in a graduate CBPR course with the goal of identifying significantly impactful statements made by the course professor. Kelley shared the following five statements as recommendations for consideration when engaging in CBPR:

Know the inherent challenges unique to CBPR; Find meaning and purpose in CBPR; Seek to understand the complexities of communities and systems as they related to CBPR; Recognize the implications of CBPR on communities and researchers; Use CBPR as a means to redress power. (p. 180).

The current study took heed of the lessons learned from Heckel and Moore (2009) and Kelley (2013). Specifically, the current study put the student-faculty partnership at the forefront by setting regularly occurring meetings and encouraging flexibility and open communication. The current study also carefully considered all five of Kelly's recommendations, but focused on "Recognize the implications of CBPR on communities and researchers" and "Use CBPR as a means to redress power." The faculty engaged students in the research community in order to enhance their learning of the research process and their self-awareness in an effort to have a fuller practicum experience. Additionally, the faculty respected the autonomy of the students to make their own decisions about the contemplative practice in which they would engage throughout the semester, their opinions on what process questions they wanted to reflect on weekly, and their autonomy to choose what they want to share in their journal during the regularly scheduled meetings.

Rationale

This study aimed to explore the potential benefits that regular contemplative practice could have on self-awareness and reflection on "self as a counselor" while engaging in the practicum course. The findings of this study represent the benefits of regular contemplative practice and offer insight to emotional needs of counseling students while engaging in the practicum course. These findings contribute to our understanding of helpful counseling student practices and contribute implications for counselor educators.

Method

Research Design

Four counseling students participated in Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) exploring the benefits of regular contemplative practice. A core principle of CBPR is that all members of the group are equal and collaborative. Since the first and second authors held a natural position of legitimate power in this study as professors in the Counseling program, attention was given to power dynamics during the meetings and research process (Heckel & Moore, 2009; Kelley, 2013). As previously mentioned, regular meeting times were made at mutually agreed upon times to ensure the students had input to the planning process. Students gave input at every stage of research collection and analysis. Faculty researchers encouraged student researchers to make individual decisions about their contemplative practice.

Throughout the semester, participants maintained a journal of reflections that evolved through their contemplative practice. The emphasis of the study was on the exploration of the experiences that counselors have in response to their contemplative practice. In vivo coding was the primary analytic method of choice to explore this qualitative data in order to prioritize the authors' voices (Striner, 2014).

Participants

Due to the community-based nature of this study, there was a reluctance to have different terms to refer to the two researchers who are faculty members and the four researchers who are counseling students. However, since the counseling student researchers completed the journals and the faculty researchers did not, reference will be made to "counseling students" and "faculty researchers" for ease of communication. All researchers are involved in the counseling program

in the same institution. The four counseling students were engaging in their first practicum course in the Master's of Arts in Counseling program.

Having students collaborate with faculty both as co-researchers and participants is a unique approach to CBPR. As such, attention was given to the comfort and equality of the student engagement in this project to avoid issues such as complications from analyzing their own data, personal vulnerability, conflicts of interest, biases, and dual roles. Specifically, student researchers who participated in this study completed a *Self-of-the Counselor* project in the semester prior to their Practicum course (and thus this study). During this project, students had the opportunity to self-reflect and share vulnerabilities with this group of participants. Therefore, the students already experienced a period of self-reflection, sharing, and opening themselves to vulnerability with this community of researchers. Additionally, although the faculty researchers in this community are counseling faculty, they were not instructors in the students' Practicum course or responsible for their grading during the semester when this study occurred, thereby eliminating the possibility of conflict of interest and complications of dual roles.

Demographics of researchers can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographics of Researchers

<u>Name</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Gender Identity</u>	<u>Racial/Ethnic Identity</u>
Erin	44	Female	White
Terrilyn	33	Female	Black
Franki	23	Female	White
Destiny	23	Female	Hispanic
Brielle	24	Female	White

Ethics

Researchers received approval to conduct this study through their institution's Institutional Review Board (IRB). IRB approval was necessary to ensure that the counseling students in the research community were safeguarded from any negative consequence for participation. Participation was voluntary and not connected to any grade in any class.

To minimize the likelihood of implying inference, the authors implemented bracketing and memoing to reduce bias within the research. The aim of memoing is to allow the researcher to assume a stance of reflexivity as it relates to the data under exploration, research situation, and participants (Birks et al., 2008). By utilizing memoing, "the researcher is able to immerse themselves in the data, explore the meanings that this data holds, maintain continuity and sustain momentum in the conduct of research" (Birks et al., 2008, p. 69). Likewise, the use of bracketing allows the researcher space to mitigate the potential of harm to the research, aiding deeper meaning making and reflection (Tufford & Newman, 2010). Furthermore, "bracketing is also a method to protect the researcher from the cumulative effects of examining what may be emotionally challenging material" (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 81).

Procedure***Protocol***

The basic protocol for this study was for the student to think about a weekly process question, engage in 30 minutes of contemplative practice weekly while considering the process question, and write a weekly reflection based on the process questions in a journal. Additionally, the research team met monthly for check-in meetings.

Process Questions

Researchers met to discuss CBPR and to agree to the contemplative process. The counseling students committed to a contemplative practice that they engaged in one time per week for 30 minutes. Process questions are included in Table 2. At the onset of the study, process questions one through four were created by faculty researchers. Process questions five through ten were jointly created at research discussion meetings with the participation of all members of the research community. Process questions were developed based upon an understanding of Self-of-the Counselor. Driven by sections 3 (Professional Practice) and 5-C (Clinical Mental Health Counseling) of the 2016 CACREP standards regarding self-awareness, professionalism, multicultural competence, and active engagement in direct client contact for clinical mental health counselors, the intention of the chosen process questions was to continue self-reflection (CACREP, 2015).

Table 2

Process Questions

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1. What feelings do I experience during my contemplative practice?
 2. How are my feelings during contemplative practice different from my feelings when engaging in indirect client hours?
 3. How are my feelings during contemplative practice different from my feelings when engaging in direct client hours?
 4. What am I worrying about this week in terms of practicum?
 5. What am I thinking about in terms of professionalism this week?
 6. How is my perception of multicultural competence evolving?
 7. How is my self-awareness during direct contact hours evolving?
 8. How am I being reflective of my practice between sessions?

9. How am I being reflexive during my sessions?

10. How has engaging in this process been helpful for you overall?

Each week, a faculty researcher sent an email reminding the research community of the weekly process question. The counseling students would then consider that question during their weekly contemplative practice. Counseling students maintained a journal in which they wrote in at least one time per week. The journal reflections served as the data to be analyzed at the end of the ten-week practice.

Contemplative Practices

Table 3 lists the contemplative practices engaged in by members of the research community. Through collaborative research team discussions, the length of weekly contemplative practice was mutually agreed upon. Student researchers shared concerns about the high demand of their course work and internship hours as a primary consideration when making this decision. The research team initially discussed three different options for the length of the contemplative practice: 15 minutes, 30 minutes, 60 minutes. The research team felt that 15 minutes was not enough time to fully engage in the practice. Conversely, the 60 minute option was perceived to be too long. Therefore, 30 minutes was deemed to be an efficient amount of time for members of the group to engage in their contemplative practice. Protocol integrity was also discussed in terms of fidelity to the 30 minutes of contemplative practice, acknowledging that if some participants practiced more or less than others, results would not be valid. All members of the research team agreed to engage in the contemplative practice for the agreed upon 30 minutes of time.

Table 3

Contemplative Practices

<u>Name</u>	<u>Contemplative Practice</u>
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Brielle Meditation and Exercise

Destiny Weight Lifting

Marie Prayer

Franki Meditation

Brielle engaged in 30 minutes of meditation, exercise, or yoga once a week for contemplation. Brielle was newly exposed to yoga as this study began. Feeling connected to this contemplative practice, she wanted to implement more of it in her self-care routine. Specifically, Brielle alternated using the yoga classes offered through the “Beachbody” program and online guided meditations.

Destiny engaged in 30 minutes of weight lifting per day throughout the week. During the act of lifting, she was in a state of flow. She has been involved in weight lifting for several years prior to this study. Since she felt that weight lifting consistently had positive effects on her mental health, this was her natural choice for a contemplative activity.

Marie engaged in 30 minutes of quiet reflection through prayer each week for contemplation. Prayer has been a central theme throughout Marie ’s life. Marie did not limit her praying to any one setting, and as such, Marie prayed at the park, in her car in the parking lot of her practicum site, or at home.

Franki engaged in 30 minutes of meditation weekly. Franki learned about meditation through several of her friends who participated growing up. She began a regular meditation practice in 2019. Franki used guided meditations or background music with meditation. For this study, Franki read the weekly contemplative question out loud to herself a few times before sitting comfortably in her space.

Journal Writing

Each week, after the research participants engaged in their 30 minutes of contemplative practice, they wrote a reflection in their journals. Their reflection was based on their thoughts and experiences of the process questions while engaging in contemplative practice. These journals were the data analyzed after the semester ended.

Monthly Meetings

Monthly meetings were held for the research team to check in on whether participants were regularly engaging in their weekly 30 minute practice and writing in their journals. Since participants were independently engaging in their contemplative practice (as opposed to a group practice), accountability encouragement and support was given through the monthly meetings.

Data Collection

As noted in the Procedure, counseling students maintained a journal in which they wrote at least one time weekly following their contemplative practice. After the practicum course concluded, the counseling students shared their journals with the research community. It was important for the practicum course to be completed before the counseling students shared their journals to ensure that anything written in these journals would not impact their grade in the practicum course. This assurance was made because the faculty researchers were not instructors of the student researchers' practicum course and the sharing of journal data would not be shared with faculty members outside the research group. Therefore, engagement in this study had no bearing on the students' grades.

Data Analysis

At the end of the 10-week data collection period, electronic journals were submitted to the faculty researchers. Each journal was formatted with numeric lines to standardize the journals for line-by-line coding. The formatted journals were then sent out to all researchers. For the first cycle

of coding, the researchers individually coded the journals using line-by-line in vivo coding. Upon completion of in vivo coding, a second cycle of coding was completed utilizing emotion coding. Emotion coding was employed to aid the understanding of feelings and/or emotions each participant researcher experienced throughout their practicum placement. Furthermore, the utilization of emotion coding was implemented to support each participant researcher's intrapersonal and interpersonal experience (Saldaña, 2016). By utilizing emotion coding, each participant researcher was able to identify, reflect, and interpret how their decision-making, judgment, and risk-taking aided their practicum experience, and the development of their counseling skills as practicing clinicians (Saldaña, 2016). This research team then met to establish a consensus of categories and identify themes.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness ensures truthfulness in data and study findings (Burkett & Morris, 2015). Trust within the context of honesty among research team members was established through the previous courses students had taken together. As previously explained, the student researchers on this team had shared vulnerable self insights with one another during previous classes and therefore, had agreed to be open and honest throughout this research process with one another. Student researchers were also encouraged at monthly meetings to share whether engaging in the contemplative practice was an activity which fit into their schedule. Student researchers were informed that they could leave the study and/or be given individual support through the university wellness center if the need arose.

Throughout the ten-week process, all members of the research team participated fully from beginning to end. When sharing their journals for analysis, researchers affirmed that they gave adequate information about self, provided sufficient detail of the context of the fieldwork and

process, and overtime, responded consistently collaborating with each other creating the foundation of credibility.

Finally, the process of memoing and bracketing assured that no preconceived thoughts or biases impacted the research process.

Analysis of Themes

First cycle coding was completed using an in vivo approach. A second cycle of coding was completed by emotion coding the in vivo codes. The emotion coding approach found themes that corresponded with each question. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, themes are discussed per process question. The Conclusion section provides a thematic overview of what transcribed for the participants during the course of the semester.

Process Question 1: What feelings do I experience during my contemplative practice?

Journal entries indicated the following theme: *counseling students experienced high levels of self-imposed anxiety and tension when starting their contemplative practices*. Students explained self-imposed pressure to engage in contemplative practice in the “right way.” For example, Franki shared in her journal, “I was very anxious when I meditated. I was trying to concentrate on what I was experiencing, and I first noticed how incredibly tense my body was. It took me a solid 10 minutes before I felt completely relaxed, or at least not tense.” Likewise, Marie wrote, “During my contemplative practice I have experienced many feelings. I was anxious to ‘get it right’ not knowing exactly what was considered right in a new environment...” High achievers such as individuals who pursue and obtain advanced degrees and/or assume leadership positions oftentimes have a desire to perform well, yet experience feelings of fraudulence or imposter phenomenon (Hutchins, 2015). Students in a Master’s program are no different and oftentimes need to be reminded of their strengths amid new clinical exposures. The reflections of students

who participated in this research indicated that they applied a high amount of pressure on themselves to do this new activity well.

After engaging in the contemplative practice, counseling students began to experience a greater sense of feeling calm. For example, Brielle wrote, “Doing this exercise has helped me clear my mind while also releasing built up stress.” Additionally, Destiny stated, “Engaging in these types of lifts... allows me to release built-up anger and frustration.” Comments made by the counseling students indicated that once they got over the initial hurdle of anxiety and self-imposed pressure, they reached a sense of clarity and a release of tension.

Process Question 2: How are my feelings during contemplative practice different from my feelings when engaging in indirect client hours?

Journal entries indicated the following theme: *counseling students felt relaxed and experienced gratitude during contemplative practice*. The Master’s in Counseling practicum course requires students to accumulate 60 hours of indirect client contact and 40 hours of direct client contact. Indirect client contact consists of activities which benefit the client but are completed when the counselor is not in the presence of the client, such as session preparation, progress note writing, and supervision. Conversely, direct client contact hours consists of time when the counselor is with the client engaging in counseling or consultation. Process question two was asked in the hopes of broadening the counseling student’s self-awareness when engaging in contemplative practice by comparing how they feel in one setting to how they feel in another setting.

Journal entries indicated that counseling students felt relaxed and experienced gratitude during contemplative practice upon reflection of process question two. Brielle reported, “[during contemplative practice] I am able to cool off and unwind.” Marie described that contemplative

practice gave her a “mental space of gratitude.” Destiny described that the contemplative practice gave her an outlet to “focus on myself.” Counseling students reflected awareness that they feel differently when engaging in contemplative practice than they feel when engaging in indirect client contact hours.

Process Question 3: How are my feelings during contemplative practice different from my feelings when engaging in direct client hours?

Journal entries indicated the following theme: *counseling students gained awareness of authentic feelings*. When asked how counseling students felt during contemplative practice versus during direct client contact hours, there was an awareness of who they were when they are alone as opposed to who they were during a counseling session. For example, Franki noted “I was anxious” during direct client contact but being able to “bring my peace to a place that is not so against me” when engaging in contemplative practice. Brielle reflected on the juxtaposition of where her focus was targeted when she reported, “During direct client hours I’m focused on listening to my clients... During contemplative practice I am focused on just me.” Marie described an interactional experience between her contemplative practice and her direct client contact hours. She stated that her contemplative practice made her feel “more authentic from start to finish” when engaging in direct client contact.

Process Question 4: What am I worrying about this week in terms of practicum?

Journal entries indicated the following theme: *counseling students found it stressful to meet multiple demands during practicum*. Counseling students have multiple roles during their practicum semester: they are students taking multiple classes; they are counseling interns working with clients; they are employees for income generating jobs; and, they are individuals who have families and social lives. For the week four process question, counseling students were asked what

they were worrying about in terms of the practicum experience. Journal entries reflected adversity when balancing their many demands. Destiny expressed, “I’m worried most about staying on top of the happenings of the world and applying that to my counseling.” Franki wrote, “I am freaking out that I am not going to hit my direct hours in time by the end of the semester.”

The worries shared by counseling students suggest a need for improved work-life balance in their lives. Implications of this need can be made for counseling programs to more directly address activities for self-care while in a Master’s of Arts in Counseling program.

Process Question 5: What am I thinking about in terms of professionalism this week?

Journal entries indicated the following theme: *counseling students strengthened their professional dispositions*. Maintaining a high degree of professionalism is a standard set forth by the CACREP (CACREP, 2015, 2.F.1.m.). Maintaining professionalism is graded according to a rubric in several counseling courses, but maintaining professionalism for the first time, on the job, while interacting with onsite supervisors and clients is a different dimension from that of the classroom.

Journal entries reflected a transition from confusion to gaining comfort and consciousness in the area of professionalism. Specific to the theme of confusion was that counseling students were trying to identify their role and assert their boundaries at their practicum sites. Brielle said, “my role at my practicum site is very confusing.” Franki first stated that she worried about “overthinking boundaries” but then indicated a growing sense of “think[ing] of myself as a practitioner.” Destiny also wrote about “maintaining boundaries” and becoming more “comfortable” at her practicum site.

Researchers also reflected on their growing consciousness of their role as a practicing professional. Marie stated that she was “wondering [about] staff’s impression of me” and that she

was “conscious about my brand.” The concept of professionalism being equated to a brand was very interesting as counseling students are evolving from students to practitioners during the practicum course.

Process Question 6: How is my perception of multicultural competence evolving?

Journal entries indicated the following theme: *counseling students strengthened their multicultural competence*. As a CACREP standard (CACREP, 2015, 2.F.2.a.; 2.F.2.c.), the evolution of multicultural competence was considered important for processing during the contemplative practice. Analysis of journal themes demonstrated that the counseling students increased awareness of their growing competence in this area. Destiny described “engaging in more conversations” helped her to become more “open-minded” and “conscious” of her words and attitudes. Marie expressed that she became “aware of [her] preconceived notions.” Franki described that her thoughts about multiculturalism grew more “expansive.” These reflections support the perspective of Ratts et al. (2015) regarding the notion of multicultural and social justice counseling competencies (MSJCC) as they encourage a framework where clinicians aspire the following competencies: “attitudes and beliefs, knowledge, skills, and action (AKSA)” (p. 3).

Process Question 7: How is my self-awareness during direct contact hours evolving?

Journal entries indicated the following theme: *counseling students’ self-awareness improved*. By week seven of the contemplative practice, counseling students found that their self-awareness during direct client contact hours was growing in a positive direction. Brielle said in her journal, “my awareness will continue to grow.” Likewise, Franki said, “my self-awareness has gotten better.” With this growth, there was a sense of evolution; that is, the growth was causing change in the students’ approach. Marie demonstrated this when she stated, “My self-awareness

during contact hours is vastly evolving. I am listening to myself more..." Destiny also stated that she was becoming "happy with my progress."

Process Question 8: How am I being reflective of my practice between sessions?

Journal entries indicated the following theme: *counseling students improved reflexivity skills between sessions*. Journals written by counseling students documented a process of growing reflection between sessions. They were consciously dedicating time to think about their clients and reflect on their process in session. For example, Marie wrote, "In between sessions I find myself planning for future sessions." Additionally, Franki noted, time between sessions "helps me process what happened in the session prior and really helps remember what was happening in the session as well as how the client was reacting and responding." This planning process and growing reflection between sessions was oriented to help them become more present in the session. Brielle noted this when she wrote, "Giving myself the time for reflexive practice also helps my physical presence while I am in sessions."

Process Question 9: How am I being reflexive during my sessions?

Journal entries indicated the following theme: *counseling students improved reflective and reflexive skills*. The concept of being reflexive during the session needs continued development. Two of the four counseling students wrote in their journals about continued reflection between sessions rather than reflexive practice during the session. Franki continued to write about her reflection process as, "I actively write notes during sessions for myself as well as filling out notes my site requires me to. When I get back to my apartment, I often will look them over."

Counseling students reflected early benefits of practice that could be felt during sessions. For example, Brielle wrote, "I applied the behaviors and feelings I feel during my [contemplative] practice and try to apply it during my sessions. Letting go of my tension and relaxing has helped

me be more present in sessions.” Brielle described her transformation from being hyper focused on her body position to being more comfortable in the session when she wrote, “In the early days of my work with my... site, I felt myself constantly aware of my contribution to sessions, even subtle things like sitting position. Now, body language and my movements seem to naturally find an open position, so less of my focus is on it.”

Process Question 10: How has engaging in this process been helpful for you overall?

Journal entries indicated the following theme: *counseling students were grateful for improved self-awareness and growth*. Counseling students shared the benefits they gained through the ten weeks of contemplative practice. Although making time for regular contemplative practice was challenging for Franki, she expressed, “I am someone who overworks themselves to a point that can be exhausting, so these meditations have really helped me take a moment and process at a pace instead of the fast pace I am used to.” Destiny indicated, “Engaging in my mindful activity helped me in a few more ways than I’d originally expected.” She specified that contemplative practice allowed her to be more self-forgiving and patient as well as enhanced her self-confidence in counseling sessions. Marie wrote, “Thank you... Having had the opportunity to make contemplative practice a deliberate effort during this season has been a rewarding experience.” Brielle noted, “It has been great for me” as she described the benefits of stress reduction and self-prioritization. All counseling students indicated that contemplative practice is worthwhile to continue beyond this study.

Conclusions

This study intended to explore the impact of contemplative practice on reflexive skills during a counselor education practicum course through a CBPR approach, with a community team of two faculty and four counseling student researchers from the same university. The research team

created weekly process questions upon which counseling students contemplated. Reactions to contemplation were written in a journal to document their reflections. After 10 weeks of contemplation, the research team analyzed themes found in the journals.

Overall, a transition from feelings of anxiety and overwhelmingness to feelings of growth, presence, and clarity was reported by the counseling students. Participants reported an increase in positive outlook as well as a generally more upbeat demeanor. Reflecting on experiences positively during the contemplative practice better prepared the students to grow the therapeutic relationship with their clients. Students were grateful for the opportunity to slow down in order to experience self-care as a direct benefit from their contemplative practice.

Post-Study Reflections

Since counseling students were both authors and participants, informal discussions were held after the analysis of journal themes to learn unintended benefits of participating in a CBPR study engaging in counseling research. Authors indicated a greater understanding that self-care is important as a goal unto itself. This comment reflected outcomes in a study by Arcuri Sanders et al. (2020) which indicated that self-care practices should be infused into the curriculum in the way that the contemplative practices were infused into the student researchers' experiences herein. Students described decreased brain fog, overall higher satisfaction with life, and greater recognition of accomplishments were results that came unintentionally from these exercises.

Limitations to Research

The research conducted in this study followed ethical guidelines in the planning, design, conduct and report of information (ACA, 2014, G.1.a). Limitations, though, must be considered when the researchers are also the participants. Firstly, participant and researcher bias are reviewed. The Hawthorne Effect may have impacted the data in that the researcher-participants were aware

that the information they wrote in the journals would be shared among their fellow researchers (Sheperis et al., 2017). Although the purpose of the monthly check-ins was to encourage openness and honesty and increase self-awareness, the possibility of the Hawthorne Effect could not be completely avoided. Likewise, the study design of this approach was difficult to control for the experimenter effects related to the influence of the intrapersonal characteristics of the researcher-participants on the outcomes (Sheperis et al., 2017).

Secondly, although mentioned earlier in the manuscript, students as research participants under the supervision of the research faculty could be a limitation to the results. Experimenter expectancies (Sheperis et al., 2017) may have led student participants to feel as though they had to respond in specific ways to the weekly process questions. The faculty researchers attempted to reduce this pressure or feeling of expectation through the monthly meetings and the delay in turning in the journals until semester grades were reported.

Thirdly, the small sample size in this study may limit generalizability. However, the diversity of the sample and the adherence to CACREP guidelines offers stability to the findings. Finally, a limitation to replication of this study lies in the assumption that counseling students want to “buy in” to the process. Often, counseling students experience multiple demands of classwork, income generating employment, social/familial obligations, and the time demands of practicum and internship, thereby making the decision to engage in contemplative practice low on their priority lists. The benefits of contemplative practice need to be recognized by the counseling students in order to enhance their willingness to engage.

Future Research

Areas of future research are prudent in the areas of faculty-student research teams in CBPR, reducing bias when the researchers are participants, and encouraging self-care among counseling

students. The literature review reflected the limited usages of faculty-student research teams. Therefore, this article is emerging in this area. Future CBPR approaches that include faculty-student researchers should continue to self-monitor for bias and influence. Care must also be given to ensure that student researchers are treated as fair and equal partners in this approach.

Reflections on 10 process questions throughout this study offered substantial insight into counseling students' experiences while engaging in contemplative practice during the practicum course. In some ways, this information seemed to only scratch the surface. For example, the need to satisfy many demands and stress levels of counseling students during practicum indicated a need for self-care and support for the counseling students when engaging in the practicum course. It would be interesting to see if teaching students and/or encouraging students to engage in contemplative practice as a part of the practicum experience would enhance self-care. In the future, it would be interesting to see the depth of responses and possible transformation in thinking that could occur if each of the 10 questions was to be used as a focus of study for the entire semester of the practicum course.

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