

**A Review of the Perceived Critical Incidents of Counselors-in-Training in Practicum**

by

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## Abstract

Counselor educators and supervisors have long acknowledged the importance of both personal and professional development throughout the process of counselor training. Counseling researchers seeking to better understand this process have used critical incidents, or moments in training that are perceived as being impactful to professional counselor development, as a way to better understand this development for students. The present study looked to identify reported perceived critical incidents among a particular group of students enrolled in their first Practicum course. Students submitted reflective journal entries throughout the semester that were analyzed using psychological phenomenological techniques. Themes were isolated for the beginning, middle, and end of the semester and were also combined to create a picture of the overall themes of the semester. The primary themes that emerged showed that students reported perceived critical incidents related to concerns regarding the management of their practicum experience, skill development, the need to process client content and personal emotions, the role of supervision, and their professional counselor development. Better understanding the emergence and domination of certain themes during certain periods of the semester can provide counselor educators and supervisors more insight as to how best to structure and approach novice counselors-in-training.

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## CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

The process of counselor training is dynamic and complex. In order to assist in the development of the most desirable characteristics in professional counselors, counselor educators and supervisors are tasked with providing appropriate educational experiences and supervisory interventions for counselors-in-training (ACA, 2005; ACES, 2011; CACREP, 2009). In the process of developing competent counselors, researchers have noted that it is important for educators and supervisors to attend to students' social-cognitive and moral development (Bowman & Reeves, 1987; Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2006; Lambie, Hagedorn, & Ieva, 2010), given higher levels of development in these areas have been associated with empathy, flexibility, the ability for perspective-taking and tolerance of ambiguity, self-care, and wellness (Borders, 1998; Lambie, Smith, & Ieva, 2009; Noam, Young, & Jilnina, 2006; Walter, 2009). Effective helpers also tend to possess self-awareness and understanding, good psychological health, sensitivity to and understanding of racial, ethnic, and cultural factors, open-mindedness, objectivity, competence, trustworthiness, interpersonal attractiveness, and ethical behavior (Hackney & Cormier, 2013, p. 10-15). While some students entering counseling programs can be considered to be "natural helpers", that is, they already possess some of the basic skills or traits which are necessary for helpful and productive counseling, they must learn how to selectively use these skills in order to be most effective for their clients. Further, some students must be nurtured in the initial development of these desired traits and skills altogether (Hackney & Cormier, 2013). Regardless of one's incoming aptitude, students who eventually adopt identities



as professional counselors will experience personal and professional growth as they progress through the educational process. Individuals typically enter a counseling program more focused on the concrete task of developing a cognitive understanding of counseling material and skills, but due to the very nature of counselor training, eventually experience both interpersonal and intrapersonal development (Brown & Srebalus, 1996; Furr & Carroll, 2003). The critical incidents that occur during this time, that is positive or negative experiences recognized by students as significant to their development, can be particularly influential and have a lasting impact on a student's development into a professional counselor (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Skovholt & McCarthy, 1988).

The fundamental goal of professional education is to develop in an individual the ability to apply appropriate professional judgment in all circumstances. Professional judgment refers to the capacity for one to be able to confidently make decisions and take action even when there is no one right answer or when working in an unfamiliar or ever-changing circumstance (Lizzio & Wilson, 2007; Schon, 1983; Stephenson & Weil, 1992). This ability to tolerate ambiguity has been found to be a hallmark of master therapists (Skovholt & Jennings, 2004), and is therefore an important factor in the process of counselor development. In order to develop a strong sense of professional judgment, both competence and capability are required (Lizzio & Wilson, 2007). Competence in this context refers to one's capacity to routinely apply previously acquired knowledge while capability refers to developing an ability to critically evaluate the assumptions that inform current practice. Given the importance of non-maleficence and ethical decision-making in the counseling process, these concepts are key for novice counselors to quickly grasp, as professional judgment must be applied the moment they meet face-to-face with their first client. Beginning counselors are particularly impacted by their early encounters both in and out

of class as well as with clients and supervisors (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Howard, Inman, & Altman, 2006; Skovholt & McCarthy, 1988). Positive experiences have been found to contribute to a trainee's ability to develop confidence in their skills, better insight into client issues, a sense of identity as a counselor, greater understanding of relationship dynamics, and comfort with accessing necessary resources (Ellis, 1991; Worthen & McNeill, 1996), while negative experiences and the perception of low supervisory support consistently led to supervisee dissatisfaction (Gray, Ladany, Walker, & Ancis, 2001; Trepal & Haberstroh, 2007). Furr and Carroll (2003) highlighted the importance of identifying the needs, concerns, and critical incidents of counselors-in-training in order to develop a greater understanding of the development process and to design appropriate educational and supervisory responses as these issues can have significant implications for both the counselor and clients they serve (p. 483). These critical incidents likely also impact one's ability to develop appropriate professional judgment, particularly if exposed to unethical or unprofessional supervisors (Trepal, Bailie, & Leeth, 2010). According to the Association for Counselor Educators and Supervisors report on Best Practices in Clinical Supervision (2011), the primary focus for individuals preparing counselors is to provide on-going supervision and to advance the knowledge of the counseling profession (p.1). Supervisors are also expected to offer legal and ethical protection to all parties involved in the counseling relationship and to meet the professional development needs of supervisees. The report repeatedly stresses the importance of acknowledging that counselor training is a developmental process, stating that supervisors must be "knowledgeable about required and recommended experiences that promote self-efficacy, development, and competence in supervisees" (11.a.v.). Supervisors are also encouraged to choose supervisory interventions intentionally based on factors like the supervisee's developmental level,

confidence, or learning style, (4.c.iii.) and to modify their approach based on supervisee characteristics, immediate needs, supervisee's supervision goals, environmental demands, and the supervision context (4.b.iii.). These practices reflect the highly individualized nature of counselor development and the importance of managing client experiences and simultaneously promoting a positive sense of self-efficacy, while also challenging for continued growth in a counselor-in-training's ability to apply sound professional judgment throughout the process of counselor training and professional identity development. Given the importance of early experiences in counselor development, it is imperative that counselor educators and supervisors are sensitive to the issues that typically occur in counselor training and are able to incorporate strategies and responses appropriate for a supervisee's level of development that will positively contribute to their growth.

While some researchers would contend that counselor professional development truly begins to expand and intensify post-graduation (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992), the fact that counselors rapidly develop both personally and professionally during the course of their training programs has long been acknowledged (Hogan, 1964; Lambie & Sias, 2009; Stoltenberg, 1981). Students at the beginning of their program often have a tendency to assume that knowledge is contextual and that decisions can be made by the information available, but typically come to realize throughout the course of their program that they must be more relativistic in their thinking and that other factors, such as values, often come into play when making decisions (Granello, 2002). In addition, many students initially anticipate learning about topics such as counseling skills, theories, and human development, but are wholly unprepared for the affective type of work that goes along with developing into the role of a professional counselor such as personal exploration and self-reflection. Moreover, many are not quite prepared for the

emotional toll of working with clients (Furr & Carroll, 2003). These experiences, both positive and negative, greatly influence a novice counselor and can have a lasting impact on their perception of their self-efficacy as a professional counselor, the therapeutic process, and the counseling profession as a whole (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Howard, Inman, & Altman, 2006; Skovholt & McCarthy, 1988).

Beginning counselors most often report worries surrounding issues regarding competence, preparation, and supervision (Jordan & Kelly, 2011), and have a tendency to focus on the “right” way to do things and perceived supervisory support, or lack thereof (Rabbinowitz, Heppner, & Roehlke, 1986). Negative and insufficient supervision has been identified as a serious problem as supervisees who lack a solid supervisory relationship have a tendency to avoid disclosing potential mistakes or to discuss a number of relevant issues (Gray, et al., 2001; Ladany, 2004; Ladany, Hill, Corbett, & Nutt, 1996; Trepal, et. al., 2010). It has been noted that supervisees engaged in supportive and effective supervision relationships have a tendency to move from a greater focus on issues surrounding support and skill development to be more willing to self-disclose and engage in self-reflection (Heppner & Roehlke, 1984). This willingness to take a closer look at one’s role and performance as a professional counselor makes it easier for a supervisor to facilitate conversations in which supervisees can process feedback that they are given and apply it to how to best work with their clients. It also contributes to the development of cognitive complexity, that is, possessing the ability to integrate and apply multiple perspectives. Individuals who engage in higher levels of cognitive complexity are willing to ask questions, listen carefully, avoid making judgments, examine their own beliefs, look for evidence, and are capable of adjusting as new information presents itself (Elder & Paul, 1994; Granello, 2010). This process, which has been referred to as recycling identity formation,

consists of the interplay and impact that conceptual learning, experiential learning, and external evaluation all have on professional counselor development (Auxier, Hughes, & Kline, 2003).

The role that counselor educators and supervisors play in this process is important, as they attend to and encourage the necessary learning and evaluation that occurs throughout these critical periods of development.

While relatively few studies have specifically addressed the development that primarily occurs in Practicum, it has been traditionally viewed as one of the most important phases in counselor development (Howard, et al., 2006; Trepal, et al., 2010; Ryan, Toohey, & Hughes, 1996), as it is the first opportunity for students to put their skills and knowledge to the test in a real-world context with real people. Students have long reported that field-based experiences and practical learning allow them to gain the most professional knowledge (Daresh, 1990), and this period of time often also provides counselors-in-training a sense of how they might potentially fit in the counseling profession (Trepal, et al., 2010). The process of reflection is important in the training and on-going growth of counselors, but has been found to be particularly relevant in these early stages (Lee, Eppler, Kendal, & Latty, 2001; McFarland, Saunders, & Allen, 2009). Reflective practice has been described as “a cycle that involves stopping to consider practices and the reasons for them, thinking critically about alternative perspectives, and changing practices based on new understandings” (O’Connor & Diggins, 2002, p. 16). Through the process of reflection, beginning counselors can critically evaluate their experiences and ideally positively progress through the stages of counselor development. Learning journals, for example, have been identified as appropriate means with which to encourage self-reflection (Burnett & Meacham, 2002). Not only are journals useful tools that can systematically document learning, self-analysis, and positive action of the counselor, but they can also be analyzed once an

experience is over in order to better understand the most important issues to the person going through the experience at the time in which they were occurring (Howard, Inman, & Altman, 2006; Lee, et al., 2001). Much like how a parallel supervisory and counseling process often occurs as students draw connections to the counseling process through their experiences in supervision (Gray, et al., 2001), counselor educators and supervisors can draw from the perceived experiences of the counselors-in-training in order to better understand their needs or thought processes and respond accordingly. The importance of supportive supervision throughout this process cannot be stressed enough, as critical incidents that occur during that first period of client contact, in addition to ever-present personal and classroom issues, can serve as catalysts for change and are particularly impactful on personal and professional growth. By encouraging students to identify and attend to critical experiences, supervisors and counselor educators alike can simultaneously encourage the reflection needed for growth while being able to better design and implement academic and supervisory interventions (Furr & Carroll, 2003).

### **Significance**

It is important for counselor educators and supervisors to appropriately prepare supervisees for the work of a professional counselor. Given the identified importance of personal, moral, and cognitive development in counselors-in-training (Donati & Watts, 2005; Lambie & Sias, 2009; Skovholt & McCarthy, 1988), it is vital that the educational and supervisory environment is supportive and conducive to positive professional development. Particularly in early counselor development, perceived positive or negative experiences can have a lasting impact not only on the development of the counselor, but also their perception about the counseling profession as a whole (Skovholt & McCarthy, 1988). While supervisors and educators cannot control all the experiences a novice counselor might have, they can be mindful

of the typical experiences reported by novice counselors and seek to support these students through appropriate interventions. Developmental models have attempted to provide a structure with which supervisors and counselor educators can design the most appropriate strategies for their students, but research must contribute to and corroborate these models in order to defend their application in supervision and allow them to influence the development of didactic content. In order to develop best practices, we must look at the most salient issues for beginning counselors and the issues, concerns, or processes they find important during the first semester of client contact.

### **Purpose**

This study aims to identify the perceived critical incidents of counselors-in-training during their first Practicum experience. By qualitatively analyzing data collected through reflective journals chronicling the issues, concerns, and processes occurring for students throughout the course of the semester, it is hoped that themes characterizing novice counselor development will emerge. By better understanding the process and essence of counselor development, counselor educators and supervisors can better develop appropriate responses both in supervision and the classroom that fully support counselor-in-training needs.

### **Research Questions**

Research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What do counselors-in-training completing their first Practicum identify as critical incidents in their development as counseling professionals?
2. What is the nature of the critical incidents reported throughout different points in the semester for these novice counselors-in-training?

### **Definition of Terms**

*Association for Counselor Educators and Supervisors:* An organization associated with the American Counseling Association committed to the training of counselors and counseling supervisors

*Counselor Education:* An academic discipline that focuses on promoting the training of competent professional counselors (Hill, 2004).

*Critical incidents:* Positive or negative significant learning moments, turning points, or moments of realization that were identified by trainees as making a significant contribution to their professional growth (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Howard, et al., 2006)

*Developmental models:* Models that are primarily focuses on how supervisees change as they gain training and supervised experience (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009)

*Practicum:* The semester for which counselors-in-training meet with clients for the first time for approximately 10 hours a week (CACREP, 2009)



## CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The primary responsibility for counselor educators is to educate and train individuals to become both ethical and effective professional counselors. This is a complex process; it is important for these educators to both impart the knowledge, values, and skills necessary for their students to develop positive identities as professional counselors, and to also cultivate characteristics that are inherent in both learning and practicing good counseling (Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2006; Woodside, Oberman, Cole, & Carruth, 2007). Section F of the American Counseling Association Code of Ethics (2005) primarily focuses on counselor supervision and the importance of client welfare throughout the process of counselor training (p.13-16). Counseling supervisors are expected to be aware of any potential counselor-in-training limitations and to provide ongoing performance appraisal (F.5.a). They should also recognize that orientation to the counseling profession is a developmental process that continues throughout the educational and clinical training of students, therefore they are expected to design and implement curriculum sensitive to the specific needs of their students (F.6.). Finally, counselor educators are charged with the commitment to not only respect the diverse values and abilities brought into the classroom by their students, but to also provide accommodations that “enhance and support diverse student well-being and academic support” (F.11.b.).

Further clarifying the importance and emphasis on supervisory training, both the ACA (2005) and the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (2009) require that students receive supervision while providing counseling services. In addition,

CACREP (2009) mandates weekly individual site and/or University supervision in addition to group supervision throughout the Practicum experience (Section III. F), recognizing the significance of early stages of development for both counselor identity development and client welfare. These guidelines also highlight the importance for counselor educators and supervisors to provide both a solid educational foundation as well as individualized feedback to counselors-in-training in order to best prepare them for the work of a professional counselor.

Counselor educators and researchers have long agreed that processing one's experiences through supervision and gaining insight into one's own progression as a counselor is a healthy part of counselor development, particularly during the training years (Donati & Watts, 2005). Researchers in the field of psychology also agree that mental health practitioners should be familiar with the scientific literature of the field, critically evaluative of their own practice, and closely monitored during the early stages of development (Bieschke, Fouad, Collins, & Halonen, 2004). Fouad et al. (2009) recommends that supervisors look for specific competencies demonstrated by their supervisees in order to determine readiness for practicum, readiness for internship, and readiness for entry into the job force (p.56). Competence for mental health professionals has been defined as "habitual and judicious use of communication, knowledge, technical skills, clinical reasoning, emotions, values, and reflection in daily practice for the benefit of the individual and the community being served" (Epstein & Hundert, 2002, p.226). In order to best assess competence, supervisors and counselor educators are instructed to monitor students throughout the course of the counseling program, listen to samples of supervisees' counseling sessions, review samples of notes and other clinical work, engage in live observations when possible, provide feedback, and complete periodic evaluations (CACREP, 2009). The importance of the supervisory relationship, especially during those early experiences in

Practicum, cannot be stressed enough, as counselors-in-training who perceive their supervisors as authoritative, rigid, inattentive, or critical report high levels of dissatisfaction, hesitancy to disclose mistakes or to ask questions, and low levels of self-efficacy (Allen, Szollos, & Williams, 1986; Chung, Baskin, & Case, 1998; Hutt, Scott, & King, 1983; Nelson, 1978; Shanfield, Matthews, & Hetherly, 1993). On the other hand, supervisees who experience supervision that is non-judgmental and supportive, instructional and task-oriented, interpretive, collegial, and open to the exploration and normalization of experiences report higher levels of satisfaction and are more willing to be honest with their supervisors and to critically evaluate their performance (Gandolfo & Brown, 1987; Kennard, Stewart, & Gluck, 1987; Worthen & McNeil, 1996). In short, researchers have found that if a supportive supervision relationship is absent, supervision is perceived as ineffective, leaving the counselor-in-training less-equipped for processing their experiences and moving forward developmentally (Heppner & Roehlke, 1984; Trepal & Haberstroh, 2007), highlighting the importance of effective and positively received supervision (Gray, Ladany, Walker, & Ancis, 2001).

Beginning in the 1950s (Fleming, 1953), developmental models of supervision in the training of mental health professionals began to be proposed and now proliferate the counseling literature (Hogan, 1964; Holloway & Roehlke, 1987; Lambie & Sias, 2009; Littrell, Lee-Bordin, & Lorenz, 1979; Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982; Scholl, 2013; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992; Stoltenberg, 1981; Worthington, 1987). The basic assumption of these models is that counselors-in-training move through stages of growth in training and development that are qualitatively different from each other and therefore require qualitatively different supervisory environments in order for satisfactory growth and acquisition of skills to occur (Chagnon & Russell, 1995). These models also describe the most typical or expected stages of counselor

development in an effort to guide supervisors and counselor educators in designing appropriate educational activities and supervisory interventions for their students and supervisees (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). Developmental models have become so widely accepted that knowledge of how trainees develop has been proposed as a core competency for counseling supervisors (Falender, et. al., 2004). Jennings and Skovholt (1999) found that master therapists eventually develop an ability to tolerate, accept, and embrace ambiguity, however novice counselors at early stages of development are more likely to operate from a 'lay' perspective, using common sense and personal life experience as opposed to clinical conceptualizations and interventions (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1995). This leads counselors-in-training to be more dependent on their supervisors and concrete in their thinking, requiring the need for more direction, structure, and suggested behavioral tasks to be incorporated into their training (Lambie & Sias, 2009).

While a few basic qualities like tolerance, a positive sense of well-being and self-esteem, social intelligence, and empathy have been found to contribute to the healthy development of a professional counselor (Aberra, 2000; Osipow & Walsh, 1973; Weaver, 2000), critical incidents that occur in the early stages of counselor development are crucial and can have a lasting impact on a trainee's perception of the therapeutic process, their self-efficacy as a counselor, and their understanding of the counseling profession (Skovholt & McCarthy, 1988). A critical incident has been defined as "a positive or negative experience recognized by the student as significant because of its influence on the student's development as a counselor" (Furr & Carroll, 2003, p.483). Considering that concern regarding competence and perceived supervisory support, or lack thereof, have consistently been reported by beginning counselors as primary issues in contributing to and impacting the quality of their counseling identity development (Ellis, 2006; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Heppner & Roehlke, 1984; Howard, Inman, & Altman, 2006), counselor

educators and supervisors must be aware of how critical incidents occurring in the beginning stages of training, as well as the supervisor's response to the incident, might impact a student's perception of the experience and ultimately impact their growth and eventual identity as a professional counselor.

### **Counselor Development**

Particularly in the beginning of counselor development, it has been found that 'personal development' and 'professional development' are so intertwined that they are virtually impossible to distinguish (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1995). Likened to how many small strands of a rope combine to make a whole, multiple individual experiences occurring during counselor development become integrated into the development of the individual and influence one's work and ultimate identity as a professional counselor (MacCluskie & Ingersoll, 2001). Identity development is an important concept in the counseling literature and generally refers to the growth process in which counselors-in-training cycle, filter through, and process both positive and negative personal and professional experiences allowing them to assume a counselor self-identity (Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982; Scholl, 2005; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992; Stoltenberg, 1981). The route of learning to counsel has been described as process-oriented in that individuals are expected to learn about and grow in a variety of areas such as understanding professional issues and values, the counseling process, the context of helping, personal qualities that facilitate helping, counseling skills, and the integration of those skills into theory and practice (Hackney & Cormier, 2005; Woodside, Oberman, Cole, & Carruth, 2007). Also, researchers have theorized and confirmed that counseling students who are developing appropriately will experience cognitive growth—that is developing a more complex view of the way in which they think, reason, and understand the environment (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009).

Given the nature and speed at which this process occurs, supervisors must maintain an awareness of the experiences their supervisee might be encountering both in and out of counseling sessions and consider how those might impact development—both cognitively and interpersonally. The following is a review of a few of the most popular developmental models in the counseling literature that incorporate these factors as well as provide guidelines to supervisors for how to approach supervision with novice counselors.

### **The Integrated Developmental Model**

The Integrated Developmental Model was first introduced by Stoltenberg in 1981 and has been continually refined and affirmed over the past two decades and along with a number of collaborators and other researchers (Leach & Stoltenberg, 1997; McNeill, Stoltenberg, & Romans, 1992; Stoltenberg, 2005a; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987; Stoltenberg, McNeill, & Crethar, 1994; Stoltenberg, McNeill, & Delworth, 1998; Stoltenberg, Pierce, & McNeill, 1987; Stoltenberg, Solomon, & Ogden, 1986; Worthen & McNeil, 1996; Worthington, 1987). Because of its empirical support, it has become one of the most popular counseling developmental models (Maki & Delworth, 1988; Stoltenberg, 2005b) as it is both descriptive of how trainees develop and prescriptive in terms of suggesting supervisor interventions (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). Containing three primary levels of development ending in a final stage called “Level 3 Integrated” in which the counselor reaches competence across a number of areas including treatment planning, assessment, conceptualization, and their use of “self” in practice, this model focuses on specific stages with which counselors-in-training must pass. In order to reach the highest level of development, IDM contends that trainees exhibit growth or change systematically through each level as they gain proficiency on “three overriding structures that provide markers in assessing professional growth” (Stoltenberg, et al., 1998, p.16; Stoltenberg,

2005a). These structures are identified as *self-other awareness*, which refers to the focus of the counselors' attention or preoccupation, *motivation*, reflecting where the trainee is focusing their energy, and finally *autonomy*, how comfortable the supervisee is in making decisions and managing their clients' presenting problems. Level 1 counselors are typically limited in experience and possess limited awareness of the impact of their actions or thoughts. Level 2 is characterized by a shift to higher levels of independence marked by periods of confidence and a tendency to occasionally over-empathize with clients. Level 3 counselors demonstrate a stronger sense of self as well as an ability to make decisions and process client issues with their supervisor in a collegial fashion (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009; Stoltenberg, 1981, 2005b). Stoltenberg and Delworth (1987) identified eight domains in which students were expected to achieve professional levels of functioning, that is movement from Level 1 to Level 3i, they are: intervention skills competence, proficiency in assessment techniques, understanding of how to conduct interpersonal assessments, an ability to engage in thorough client conceptualization, an awareness and acceptance of individual differences, capacity to recognize personal theoretical orientation, ability to develop appropriate treatment plans and goals, and understanding of the expectations for both personal and professional ethical behavior.

For the purposes of this study, focused on the perceived critical incidents of counselors-in-training engaged in their first Practicum, the understood typical experiences of supervisees in the Level 1 stage of development are most salient to consider. Supervisees in this stage have been found to typically possess limited experience and are therefore more anxious and reliant on their supervisor (Stoltenberg, 2005b). Supervisors must be mindful to engage in little confrontation and attempt to provide as much positive feedback as possible (Stoltenberg, et al., 1998). Individuals in this stage are usually highly self-focused and experience doubt as to

whether they will be able to develop the skills necessary to be effective as a professional counselor. In addition, these students are often worried about evaluation (Hale & Stoltenberg, 1988). The primary focus of this stage is often on one's behavior and ability to implement appropriate techniques in addition to managing thoughts related to knowing what to do in session or how to best understand their clients and emotions such as anxiety, frustration, sympathy, and hopefulness. While this stage is full of insecurity, it is also characterized by a strong motivation to develop professionally and quickly gain proficiency. These students look to their supervisors for the "best" or "most right" approach and are usually willing to engage in additional reading or research in order to better understand client problems. Supervisors working with supervisees in this stage are advised to provide a lot of structure through which supervisees can better manage anxiety and to give direction for encouraging their students to further explore factors influencing the direction to take or interventions to use in session with their clients (Stoltenberg, et al., 1998; Stoltenberg, 2005a).

Given the theorized importance of a structured approach for counselors-in-training at the Level 1 stage of development, the IDM suggests specific interventions for which supervisors might use to offer support and encourage growth to the next level (Stoltenberg, 2005a). The most basic intervention is one that is *facilitative* and therefore focused on communicating support and encouraging development through praise, attentive listening, or reflection. *Prescriptive* techniques such as assigning homework, can be particularly useful. Supervisors may choose to use something more *conceptual* and have supervisees link theory or research to a client's presenting problem. Supervisors might also be more *confrontive* and redirect a self-focused beginning counselor to approach the problem from the client's perspective. Finally, while sometimes a bit beyond the cognitive level of a Level I counselor, a supervisor might choose a



*catalytic* intervention that asks the supervisee to expand their awareness and attempt to explore client reactions or perhaps the influence of counselor thoughts occurring in session or supervision (Stoltenberg, 2005a). On top of everything else, supervisors must maintain an awareness that supervisees may be on different levels in different domains. For instance, a counselor may be showing signs of Level 2 development with adults, but continues to display characteristics more common of a Level 1 therapist when working with adolescents (Stoltenberg, 2005b).

The Integrated Developmental Model may be one of the most influential models in the counseling literature to date, but it is not the only one. Other models have attempted to take a comprehensive look at the ways in which counselors develop in training and the role of the supervisor in the process. One such model that has received support and recently received an updated look by Scholl (2013) is the Loganbill, Hardy, and Dellworth Model.

### **Loganbill, Hardy, and Delworth Model**

The Loganbill, Hardy, and Delworth Model (1982) is a complex model that focuses on the characteristic attitude or response a counselor might experience towards the world, their self, or their supervisor. It is believed the supervisee will cycle through three stages, stagnation, confusion, and integration, as they work through all eight of the identified supervisee issues and eventually achieve mastery. For beginning counselors, *stagnation* is usually characterized by an overreliance on one's supervisor or the view that the supervisor is irrelevant. *Confusion* can manifest itself in a number of ways, but generally results in feelings of instability, conflict, and disorganization, and at times even frustration with the supervisor who may be perceived as either not helpful or incompetent. *Integration* is the blissful period in which a supervisee begins to find one's footing and can begin to develop the awareness and flexibility needed to move to the next

stage of development (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009; Loganbill, et al., 1982). The vectors identified as crucial in counselor development are modeled after Chickering's (1969) popular model of college student development and were recently updated by Scholl (2013) to reflect the current literature and research. Follow-up responses and studies by Sansbury (1982) and Ellis (1991) modestly supported the Loganbill, et al. Model confirming the assertion that understanding the conflict being experienced at a specific stage in early counselor development can "help the supervisor anticipate or even encourage the emergence of certain themes that need to be addressed from a developmental perspective" (Loganbill, et al., 1982, p.20).

The seven vectors of the Loganbill, et al. model are predicated on the foundation of Chickering's (1969) model of development in college students, which focuses on the importance of affective, behavioral, and cognitive development. Students are expected to undergo a process in which they begin to experience a change in attitude and behaviors as a result of learning or perceived important incidents. While uncomfortable for the individual at first, each stage eventually reaches a period of psychosocial resolution. This differentiation and reintegration process occurs within each stage and in turn strengthens an individual's sense of identity. This multi-faceted view is believed to closely mirror the way in which a counselor's identity is expected to grow. Scholl (2013) proposed that the Loganbill, et al. Model remains a valid method for viewing development, and modified the vectors to reflect the current literature in the counseling field in addition to the updates proposed by Chickering and Reisser (1993).

These seven vectors are as follows (Scholl, 2013; Loganbill, et al., 1982):

1. Issues of competence in using therapeutic skills and techniques
2. Issues of awareness and effective use of emotions in counseling—including motivations for entering and participating in counseling

3. Issues of movement from dependence through autonomy toward interdependence as they relate to choices, decision, and practice
4. Issues of capacity for mature interpersonal relationships as they relate to choices, decision, and practice
5. Issues of identity, including but not limited to, race, gender, values, culture, and supervisees identity as a counselor
6. Issues of purpose and direction as they relate to the establishment and awareness of therapeutic goals
7. Issues of professional ethics

This model is thorough in its approach to the multitude of common issues faced by beginning counselors. Supervisors who are aware of these themes and how they might impact their supervisees may remain cognizant of the factors with which beginning counselors must balance. While these models are generalizable for both counselors serving in mental health and school settings, there is also a model designed specifically for counselor educators focused on the supervision of school counselors. This model, called the Integrative Psychological Model of Supervision for Professional School Counselors-in-Training, attempts to address the psychological and ego growth desired in professional school counselors (Lambie & Sias, 2009), although it could be generalized to also speak to the growth of counselors in general.

### **Integrative Psychological Developmental Supervision Model**

The Integrative Psychological Developmental Model of Supervision was developed primarily for the training of professional school counselors. This model seeks to provide guidelines to supervisors and counselor educators on strategies that support psychological growth and skill development (Lambie & Sias, 2009) and is founded on research that has

consistently linked higher levels of psychological maturity to traits that are desirable in effective and ethical professional counselors— empathy, flexibility, personal and interpersonal awareness, resilience, tolerance for ambiguity, ego resilience, integrity, goal-directedness, and ability to set boundaries (Chandler, Alexander, & Heaton, 2005; Lambie, 2007; Lambie & Sias, 2009; Manners, Durkin, & Nesdale, 2004). Grounded in Loevinger’s (1976) ego developmental theory, this model acknowledges that ego development encompasses cognitive, moral, self, interpersonal, and character development and as it grows, individuals are able to think more complexly, exhibit greater impulse control, possess strong interpersonal skills, and ultimately integration of self (Cohn & Westenberg, 2004; Lambie, 2007; Manners & Durkin, 2001). Loevinger’s (1976) model contends that growth is related to one’s ability to adapt. As students experience new situations, they must contend with information “that does not fit their existing schema for the self or surrounding world” (Manners & Durkin, 2000, p.478). Students either incorporate this information into an existing schema, which results in developmental stability, or alters their schema to accommodate the new experience, resulting in developmental growth (Manners, et al., 2004). The levels of ego development identified by Loevinger (1976) reflect the ways in which individuals are seen to develop and build on each other in sequence. They are as follows: impulsive, self-protective, conformist, self-aware, conscientious, individualistic, autonomous, and integrated.

The IPDSM seeks to provide practical steps for university supervisors. It is designed to “enhance problem-solving skills, creativity, emotional awareness, and supervisees’ confidence and self-efficacy regarding the use of effective clinical practices” (Spence, Wilson, Kavanagh, Strong, & Worrall, 2001, p. 137). The following is an overview of the steps or interventions that the IPDSM encourages supervisors to take in order to optimize counselor-in-training ego

development. The first element, that is an important step towards minimizing anxiety, is to support the students' need for a *concrete and salient orientation*. This means establishing a handbook that clearly outlines the expectations of supervision as well as develop an individualized supervision contract with the supervisee. In addition, supervisors are encouraged to do an assessment of their student's psychological development in order to best match the needs of the student. Students are then ready to engage in *role-taking experiences* and are exposed to the field for the first time. Here, they begin to experience what it will actually look like to work in the role of a counselor. In order to encourage maturation, supervisors should attempt to make field experiences *personally salient*. Helping supervisees with concerns that are most relevant at the moment are considered more important than trying to stick to an overall plan. Supervisors are also told to be mindful of the supervisees' *emotional engagement*. This requires the exploration of not only what the counselor-in-training is experiencing cognitively in session, but also how they are responding affectively. Next is the engagement of a supervisee's *interpersonal nature*, allowing the supervisee to share their personal beliefs about the experiences or processes they are witnessing. One of the primary keys to encouraging psychological maturation identified by this model is *guided reflection*. This is founded on the belief that meaningful learning can only truly occur through self-examination of previously held beliefs, patterns of interaction, and the primary motivation behind chosen interventions (Ward & House, 1998). These activities may take the form of guided reflection in individual and group supervision or through journaling and self-appraisal of tapes. This reflection, while important, must be balanced. This is why the IPDSM recommends having a set time and place for supervision, resulting in a balance between experience and reflection. *Continuity* is also a key concept for ideal counselor growth to occur. This would require that clinical supervision begin

during Practicum and continue throughout internship. According to the model, the experiences counselors-in-training have during field work are sufficient for growth to occur, therefore it is important for supervisors to provide *support* in the beginning then gradually begin to *challenge* more as a supervisees' anxiety dissipates and they begin to be able to think more clearly and complexly. Finally, supervisors must focus on *skill development*. This can take the form of role-playing in session or providing homework (Lambie & Sias, 2009).

This model attempts to address supervision, particularly for school counselors-in-training from a practical and flexible approach. Grounded in research on ego development, the interventions are purely intended to help move the counselor-in-training to a more mature level of conceptualizing their world. It also briefly addresses the importance of attending to skill development (Lambie & Sias, 2009). The models discussed thus far are primarily focused on student training, but the Skovholt and Ronnestad Model was developed from hundreds of interviews and addresses comprehensive counselor development across the professional lifespan (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1993, 2003).

### **Skovholt and Ronnestad Model of Counselor Development**

The Skovholt and Ronnestad Model was derived qualitatively from hundreds of interviews with professional counselors and seeks to accurately describe the phases of professional counselor development. Originally composed of eight, it was recently revised to include six phases ranging from the beginning stages of training to professionals with over 20 years of experience (Skovholt and Ronnestad, 1993, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Taking into consideration factors such as the role of affect, sources of influence, working and learning styles, and satisfaction, they also identified 20 themes that relate to counselor development. In addition to receiving favor as a model that is representative and of use to counseling supervisors,

it was also noted by Bernard and Goodyear (2009) as corresponding well to the stages proposed by Stoltenberg, et al. (1998).

The Skovholt and Ronnestad (2003) model begins with the *Lay Helper Phase*. This is characterized by a tendency to approach problems in the same way that they help friends or family. This may lead to boundary problems or a tendency to sympathize as opposed to empathize. Next marks the *Beginning Student Phase* in which students are dependent, anxious, and vulnerable and are particularly reliant on their supervisor's support. Here, counselors-in-training are looking for the "right" way to make decisions and will tend to look for models or other practitioners to follow. Once students reach a basic level of functioning, they move towards the *Advanced Student Phase*. Here, they are focused and avoidant of risk. Supervision in this stage is particularly powerful as students are able to better see their growth and can consolidate their learning. The years post-graduation mark the *Novice Professional Phase* in which the new counselor begins to integrate their personality into their work. In addition, this phase is marked by the counselor testing a number of work roles and environments in order to seek the most compatible fit. As time passes, individuals move into the *Experienced Professional Phase*. In this phase, counselors are comfortable working with clients using their own values, interests, and personality. Techniques are used more flexibly, and the counselor has the ability to be engaged with a client, but step back when the session is over. The final phase is that of the *Senior Professional*. These counselors typically are authentic and follow a very individualized approach. Quite humble, they often doubt that much else can be added to the field and must cope with issues surrounding loss (Skovholt and Ronnestad, 2003). A few of the themes anticipated by Skovholt and Ronnestad (1993, 2003) touched on the importance of development and integration of both the personal and professional self, the importance of continuous reflection and lifelong

learning, the impact clients have on development, and an increasing appreciation for human variability.

New counselors-in-training are often preoccupied with consuming knowledge across many levels, are insecure but enthusiastic, often feel overwhelmed by the clashing of old and new ideas, have a sense of urgency in learning conceptual ideas, and engage in a lot of cognitive processing and introspection. As these students transition to experiences with clients, they have a tendency to use what they naturally know and incorporate personal experiences in the same way as a sympathetic friend. Learning is experiential, and the use of common sense strategies allow the supervisee to get by and for the student to assume that they are being generally effective. As time progresses, students generally can begin to seek client feedback and supervisor reactions as they search for helpful conceptual ideas and useful techniques (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992).

This model is unique in that it is derived from interviews directly with counselors at all stages of development. All of the developmental models discussed have a focus on providing support to beginning counselors as they attempt to learn the values, skills, and knowledge necessary to be an effective professional counselor.

### **Critical Incidents**

The critical incident technique was first proposed by Flanagan (1954) in an effort to create a set of procedures for collecting observations about human behavior that could then be applied to solve practical problems or to develop broad psychological principles. Touted as a method that can assist in developing effective procedures for training, it seeks to identify factors that contribute to the successful acquisition of a skill and the particular moments for which growth was most meaningful or likely to occur. Originally primarily gathered through interviews, critical incidents are now also derived from a number of other sources including



journals (Burnett & Meacham, 2002; Lee, Eppler, Kendal, & Latty, 2001). The data analysis procedures of the critical incident technique are similar to those of phenomenological techniques and rely upon forming categories and a list of general behaviors that can be anticipated to occur during the particular phenomenon being studied (Flanagan, 1954). This technique and the theory behind it has been modified to suit the needs of many fields and was first applied in the counseling literature by researchers seeking to better understand critical incidents that occur in the therapeutic process (Kell & Mueller, 1966). In 1984, Heppner and Roehlke sought to look at critical incidents occurring in the supervision process in order to determine what was most important to supervisees and to establish if there was a difference between the perceived critical incidents of novice and more advanced counselors-in-training (p.77). Since that time, a few studies have also looked at perceived critical incidents by counselors-in-training in order to better understand their experiences and apply that knowledge to in order to develop better educational experiences and supervisory support (Ellis, 1991; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Heppner & Roehlke, 1984; Howard, Inman, & Altman, 2006; Kivlighan & Arthur, 2000; Woodside, Oberman, Cole, & Carruth, 2007). For example, Kivlighan and Arthur (2000) were able to apply this technique to show that as client and novice counselor relationships developed, so did their agreement on what was important in session. Increasing convergence between counselors and clients was also found to be related to stronger counseling outcomes and a reported decrease in clients' reported interpersonal problems. Also, critical incident research has found that a supportive supervisory relationship is as important as the rapport between a counselor and client (Gray, Ladany, Walker, & Ancis, 2001; Heppner & Roehlke, 1984; Hutt, Scott, & King, 1983). These concepts are important for counselor educators and supervisors to understand, as they are

responsible for ensuring the most supportive learning environments necessary for adequate trainee skill and interpersonal development.

The term critical incident has been defined a number of ways throughout the counseling literature, but overall follows the general theme of identified incidents occurring across a variety of periods in training that hold perceived significance to the supervisee for its influence on their development. Critical incidents are perceived as catalysts for change and are therefore considered relevant in their impact on personal and professional growth (Furr & Carroll, 2003). Much like the importance of disequilibrium in causing movement through progressive stages in developmental models, critical incidents have been noted for their importance on understanding the most salient and impactful experiences at particular levels of training. In its first application in the study of the supervision process, a critical incident was eventually defined as issues such as self-awareness, professional development, competency, and personal issues affecting counseling (Heppner & Roehlke, 1984). From there, Ellis (1991) defined a critical incident in the counselor training process as a major turning point in supervision that resulted in increased effectiveness as a counselor. A couple of studies were interested in specifically soliciting both positive and negative events occurring during Practicum and supervision that were deemed influential to one's development as a counselor (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Trepal, Bailie, & Leeth, 2010), while the definition proposed by Howard, Inman, and Altman (2006) is likely the most comprehensive definition as they explained critical incidents to be "significant learning moments, turning points, or moments of realization that were identified by the trainee as making a significant contribution to their professional growth" (p.88).

Studies looking at perceived critical incidents of counselors-in-training have found a couple of themes. Across all studies, issues related to competence and the importance of

supportive supervision are identified again and again by beginning counselors-in-training (Ellis, 1991; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Heppner & Roehlke, 1984; Howard et al., 2006; Patterson & Levitt, 2011; Woodside, et al, 2007). Over time, it appears as though more advanced supervisees are capable of moving away from a focus on the need for support and a hyperawareness on improving their skills, to the ability to begin to self-disclose and process more personally threatening content. Initially, however, the focus is on skill building and their rapport with their supervisor (Heppner & Roehlke, 1984). In addition, critical incidents derived from counselors-in-training showed that many students are impacted by their emotional reactions to the counseling process and the need to balance intense affective experiences. Also, the importance of respecting individual differences and existential issues related to value conflicts has also been frequently identified (Ellis, 1991; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Heppner & Roehlke, 1984; Howard, et al., 2006). Furr & Carroll (2003) identified nine separate categories describing perceived critical incidents having occurred throughout a student's graduate program. These issues related to topics such as cognitive and professional development, perceived obstacles and support, beliefs about competency, and skill development. To take the findings a step further, they synthesized these categories and applied them to Beck's model that looked at the relationship among beliefs, behavior, cognitions, and affect. This model showed how existential issues and value conflicts throughout one's graduate program will affect cognitive development and thoughts related to competency and professional identity which then leads to feelings related to perceived support and personal growth which finally impacts skill development (Furr & Carroll, 2003). The most recent study looking to identify critical incidents perceived by counselors-in-training as being important to their professional development found that professional identity, personal reactions, competence, supervision, and philosophy were all identified (Howard, et al., 2006). Ellis (1991)

noted in his study that while some issues identified were expected, such as the impact of personal issues, some areas such as matters concerning issues related to identity, ethics, and personal motivation were noticeably missing from his results. Bischoff, Barton, Thober, and Hawley (2002) found that “clinical self-confidence” in beginning marriage and family therapy supervisees was linked to experiences in supervision, client contact, feedback, and vicarious learning. This lends itself to the idea that beginning counselors are only capable of thinking at a certain level of cognitive complexity.

While novice counselors-in-training have been looked at in the literature, there is nothing that discusses the process that occurs throughout the course of the semester. While it has been identified repeatedly that supervisory support and the importance of building competence are vital in the beginning stages of development, no one has yet looked to see when the shift begins to actually occur from needing more structure to less structure and more of a focus on processing in supervision.

### **Conclusion**

The importance of enhancing positive counselor development cannot be stressed enough. Beginning counselors are often worried about issues related to competence, supervision, and preparation (Jordan & Kelly, 2011). Counselors who experience strong supervisory support are more likely to develop confidence, client insight, and a sense of identity as a counselor, while negative experiences during training have been linked to negative outcomes of counselor development (Gray, et al., 2001; Worthen & McNeil, 1996). Critical incidents that occur throughout counselor training can provide insight into the most appropriate educational practices and supervisory interventions (Furr & Carroll, 2003), particularly for counselors entering their first Practicum.

## CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY

### **Research Design**

The intent of this phenomenological study is to describe the perceived critical incidents (CIs) in the counseling process for Master's level counseling students enrolled in their first Counseling Practicum. Given that beginning counselors may experience a number of encounters that will have a lasting impact on their understanding of the counseling profession, their perception of the therapeutic process, and their own self-efficacy as counselors (Howard, Inman, & Altman, 2006; Skovholt & McCarthy, 1988), this study looks to identify themes among perceived critical incidents for novice counselors-in-training using the psychological phenomenological approach to data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2006; Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). The research questions serving as the foundation to this process are: What do counselors-in-training completing their first Practicum identify as critical incidents in their development as counseling professionals? What is the nature of the critical incidents reported throughout different points in the semester for novice counselors-in-training?

### **Research Method**

The main purpose behind phenomenological research is to seek to describe the meaning or universal essence of a human experience or phenomenon by collecting individual experiences and analyzing those experiences for common elements or themes (Creswell, 2006; van Manen, 1990). Through careful analysis, researchers can develop a description that includes both "what" individuals experienced as well as "how" they experienced it (Creswell, 2006; Moustakas, 1994).

The phenomenological approach was born out of a philosophical perspective that believes scientific knowledge has been limited by a focus on empirical approaches and that we should approach research without any pre-judgments or expectations. This worldview also asserts that consciousness is always directed towards an object and thus one's reality is actually found within the perceived meaning of that object or event for that individual (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990). By describing what one sees within qualitative data, the phenomenological researcher is not seeking to prove a hypothesis about the chosen phenomenon, but rather to allow the details of the experience to present itself and to tell a story about what it is universally like to engage in the experience (Creswell, 2006). This description also goes a step beyond a mere explanation of what happened during a one-time occurrence of an experience, but rather describes the essence of what it might be like for any human to go through the same event themselves by identifying themes of meaning across individual experiences (van Manen, 1990).

Mahrer (1988) made a case for the adoption of discovery-oriented approaches like phenomenology in psychotherapeutic research as an alternative to more popular hypothesis-oriented research. He argued that hypothesis-testing is not always well-suited to the type of knowledge one might want to gain about the psychotherapeutic process, as it is often unfeasible to confirm or disconfirm theories of psychotherapy and the rigidity of the process makes it difficult to capture the complex interactions that occur in the field (p. 694-697). Influenced by other proponents of qualitative research, Mahrer proposed and outlined a discovery-oriented design intended to approach counseling research with a mindset focused on learning about this complex process through discovery and the avoidance of pre-conceived notions (Mahrer, 1988; Mahrer & Boulet, 1999). He also calls for this research to inquire into subtle interconnections between all players and among all stages of counseling, which he states can only be discovered

by remaining open to the possibilities (p. 697). According to Mahrer (1988), a researcher must do what seems almost counterintuitive after years of statistical training, ask broad questions about the subjective experience of a phenomenon as opposed to trying to either prove or disprove a theory about a specific element of the phenomenon.

The critical incident technique is another method that has been used for many years as a way to better understand what phenomenologists refer to as “lived experiences” (Skovholt & McCarthy, 1988). Also developed through a discovery-oriented lens, the critical incident technique is reminiscent of phenomenologist techniques that look to develop a frame of reference, form categories of meaning, and then create clusters of similar content describing the experience. While the term critical incident originally referred to an approach developed to break down the steps and understand the process of learning a complex task (Flanagan, 1954), it is now more typically used in the counseling literature as a significant learning moment, turning point, or moment of realization identified as significant to a counselor’s development (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Howard, et. al. 2006).

There are two primary approaches to designing a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2006). These are called hermeneutical and psychological phenomenology respectively. Both of these methods are focused on developing a clearer understanding of the universal elements of a lived experience, however the approaches differ in their procedures to data analysis. In hermeneutical approaches, the researcher takes an active role in reflecting on and interpreting both their own personal experiences or encounters with the phenomenon as well as on the data (van Manen, 1990). The final product is the result of this interpretive process and is greatly influenced by the researcher conducting the study (p.59). Psychological phenomenology, on the other hand, attempts to remove as much of their researcher’s bias as possible through the process

of epoche (also called bracketing) in which a researcher actually attempts to set aside their personal experiences and approach the data with as fresh of a perspective as possible (Moustakas, 1994). Also called the “transcendental” approach, the focus is on perceiving the data as if experiencing the phenomenon for the first time and advises against the researcher attempting to interpret the data, but rather to describe exactly what presents itself thematically across responses. Once the textural description has been identified, that which the participants report to experience, a structural description can be developed taking into account the situation or context of the event. By combining these descriptions researchers can provide the essence of what it might be like to experience the chosen phenomenon in that particular context (Creswell, 2007; Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994).

Taking into account that the psychological phenomenological approach has been widely addressed in the literature with systematic steps outlined for proper design procedure and data analysis, and that there are guidelines for how to construct a textural and structural description from the data, it was identified as the overall best approach to the current matter of inquiry. That is, seeking to understand the lived experiences, or critical incidents, of counselors-in-training engaged in their first Practicum. This approach, which is similar to both the critical incident technique and Mahrer’s discovery-oriented approach, has been called the “rational path” of knowledge that allows for a description of the overall essence of a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Procedures**

The procedures for conducting this psychological phenomenological study are modeled after the recommendations originally outlined by Moustakas (1994) and later refined by Giorgi (2009). Following this, it is first important to determine if the research problem is best examined



using a phenomenological approach. Taking into consideration what we want to know about novice counselor development, that is what is perceived as important to beginning counselors and the features of this particular stage of counselor development, it is important to avoid including preconceived notions but rather to find out what is perceived as important by the counselors-in-training themselves. Given that phenomenological approaches are non-hypothesis driven and also seek to describe the essence of a phenomenon, it is logical that such an approach is indeed the appropriate design for the question at hand.

The next element of designing a phenomenological study is for the researcher to bracket off their experiences with the phenomena. With this in mind, the researcher reflected upon their own experiences as a counselor-in-training and supervisor in order to become more aware of innate biases and beliefs. Through this “bracketing” process, the researcher is now cognizant of how they might view the process and can seek to avoid placing this expectation on the data. With this process complete, data can be analyzed as objectively as possible.

Qualitative data can be collected in a number of ways, and in this case it seemed appropriate to document the experiences of counselors-in-training throughout their first Practicum experience through the use of reflective journals. Journals have been identified as an effective means with which to systematically document learning and to promote self-analysis and reflection (Burnett & Meacham, 2002). In addition, journals have also been recognized as nonthreatening tools by which to record mental processes (Kerka, 1996) and have also been found to encourage the process of experiential learning through which an author will typically concretely record an experience, reflect on the experience, and then be able to integrate that experience into their overall schema in order to make decisions or solve problems (Copeland, 1986; Grennan, 1989; Zeichner, 1986). For these reasons, journals were deemed as an

appropriate method of collected the perceived critical incidents occurring throughout the semester. Howard, et al.'s (2006) look at critical incidents through journals helped to provide the foundation for this study. Their definition of critical incidents, that is significant learning moments, turning points, or moments of realization that made a significant impact on one's growth as a counselor, was used as the guiding definition for students writing their reflections. In order to get the most holistic picture, both Clinical Mental Health Counseling Practicum students were requested to record reflective journal entries throughout the semester as a part of their Practicum class requirement. The assignment guide given to students for completing their journals is included in Appendix A. Students were instructed to complete a total of ten journal entries throughout the course of the semester, with deadlines being stratified at specific times during the semester. The data used for this study was collected throughout the Fall 2012 semester. By collecting data throughout the semester, the question as to what counselors-in-training perceive as important could not only be tracked in a linear fashion, but also gave students the medium to present their experiences without influence from any outside sources. Once data was collected, analysis began using this question as a guiding reference: What do novice counselors-in-training identify as critical incidents in their development as counseling professionals?

### **Participants**

Participants are Master's level counseling students enrolled in a CACREP (2009) accredited program at a mid-sized public university in the southeastern United States. The total number of participants in this study was 7. All of the participants were enrolled in the Clinical Mental Health Counseling program. These students spent 10-12 hours a week engaged in the Practicum experience, in which they met with clients for the first time. Participants were required

to complete 100 total hours on their respective sites, with 40 of those hours being direct service in individual and group counseling sessions. Participants were selected using convenience sampling, as all critical incidents were collected in the form of reflections that were required to be submitted throughout the semester by students enrolled in the course. Students had the option to remove all of their reflections from the data pool or remove particular journal entries they did not wish included. All reflections were made confidential by the professor responsible for the collection of data by removing the names and identifying information before sharing the data with the researcher. Participants in this study were required to be novice counselors-in-training and had no previous experience working with clients prior to completing the reflective journal entries.

### **Data Collection**

The data being analyzed in this study was previously collected over the course of the Fall 2012 semester in order to be used for program evaluation. Students from a Clinical Mental Health Counseling program enrolled in their first counseling Practicum course were required to submit a total of ten reflective journal entries throughout the semester in which they reflected upon perceived critical incidents related to their development as a counselor. The researcher analyzing the data was not involved in the course or collection of journal entries and had no personal or supervisory relationship with the students. No word limit was specified for each journal entry, but students were instructed to complete between 1½ to 2 pages in order to supply a sufficient response. Students had some flexibility in when they chose to write an entry, but they were required to submit a set of three at three different periods of time throughout the semester. These times were chosen as representative of the beginning, middle, and end of the Practicum experience for these students. This not only allows for analysis of overall thematic content, but

also gives the opportunity to see which particular themes tended to occur throughout these periods over the course of the semester. These documents were collected as a part of Practicum class assignments, and students were given credit for their reflections. These journal entries provided the data needed to look for critical incidents identified by these counselors-in-training. The results will be analyzed using transcendental phenomenological methods in order to determine both the textural and structural themes inherent in the phenomenon of experiencing critical incidents in early counselor development.

### **Data Analysis**

The purpose of this data analysis is to better understand the experiences of counselors-in-training by identifying and analyzing perceived critical incidents in the counseling process. In order to identify both the description and “essence” of critical incidents in early counselor development, a transcendental phenomenological approach, which approaches data analysis much in the same way as the critical incident technique, will be employed for data analysis. It has been recommended that there be a minimum of three participants when employing the phenomenological research method (Giorgi, 2009; Englander, 2012). In this study, seven participants agreed for their journal entries to be analyzed. These participants were determined to be representative of the typical counseling cohort for this program and it was agreed that there was enough data to sufficiently reach saturation by the researcher and the professor responsible for collecting the data. Moustakas (1994) combined numerous proposed qualitative methods for analyzing data from this perspective and suggested a simple yet effective process. This sequential process was chosen as ideal for constructing the steps needed to appropriately complete data analysis in this study.

First, in order to properly prepare for the analysis of the journal entries, the researcher is required to describe and set aside their own experiences as a former counselor-in-training. This process, also referred to as *epoche*, allows for the researcher to attempt to gain the ability as much as possible to approach the data as if for the first time (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Having completed this step before getting access to the data, the researcher will be ready to complete the rest of the analysis with a clear mind and no expectations as to what might reveal itself in the data.

Reflections that have been submitted for analysis will be stratified by the beginning, middle, and end of the semester for each participant. These designations will be determined upon the due dates placed throughout the semester of data collection. The final reflections will also be combined separately as they were completed using question prompts provided by the professor of the Practicum course. Once the data has been organized appropriately, the next step will be to read over each piece of data holistically in order to get a sense of the general meaning. At this point, the researcher will not attempt to make any judgments about the reflections themselves, but simply become acclimated with their content. After having read over the journal entry, non-repetitive significant statements will be identified that are reflective of the general meaning of the journal entry. These significant statements will be identified by asking the question: “What does the counselor-in-training report to perceive as a critical incident impacting their development as a counselor in this reflection?” Once significant statements have been identified, they will be summarized to represent the general point or meaning of the author regarding the critical incident. Each significant statement identified will be treated with equal importance. This process, called *horizontalization*, will make it easier to later sort significant statements into “meaning units” or themes (Creswell, 2006). Creating meaning units requires the grouping of

similar significant statements that can then be classified as “themes”. These themes are intended to be representative of the overall essence of the participants’ experiences throughout the semester that can be derived from the compilation of similar statements purported by different counselors within the same time period. The construction of these themes will allow for the development of a textural description, that is, which types of critical incidents were most commonly reported among novice counselors-in-training. These textural descriptions will include concrete examples from the data supporting the findings and will provide a description as to what happened for these counselors-in-training during their first Practicum.

The transcendental phenomenological research method also looks to describe how a process or phenomenon occurred. With that goal in mind, the next step will be to reflect on the context and setting in which the critical incidents were experienced. Through this, a pattern that presents itself in the data can be constructed and will speak to what elements in particular of the critical incidents were perceived as impactful to counselor development. This structural description will be created by combining all of the themes present across the beginning, middle, and end of the semester, and will take the overall context into account in order to create an overall sense of what these students experienced throughout the entire course of the semester. This description will be more focused on how the phenomenon was actually experienced (Creswell, 2006).

Finally, both the textural and structural descriptions derived from the data will be combined in order to present a composite description representing the “essence” of the phenomenon in question. The resulting narrative will provide a description of this essence through tables and discussion pertaining to what was in the data that lent to the particular development of themes. Counselor educators and supervisors will ideally be left with a true

sense of which experiences were perceived by these novice counselors-in-training throughout Practicum as most impactful to their development as professional counselors and at which point in the semester these themes occurred (Creswell, 2006; Moustakas, 1994).

### **Summary**

The purpose of the study is to identify critical incidents in the counseling process for Practicum students meeting with clients for the first time. By approaching this concept phenomenologically, the goal is to better understand and describe the process of novice counselor development by looking closely at journal entries highlighting perceived critical incidents throughout the semester and to explore why those critical incidents were perceived as important. This will allow for a better understanding of the essence of counselor development and provide insight into the important processes that occur during this critical period of counselor training and development.

## CHAPTER IV. RESULTS

This chapter is devoted to the results of the phenomenological analysis that was completed on journal entries collected from novice counselors-in-training over the course of their first Practicum experience. This chapter includes information about the participants and identified themes regarding the perceived critical incidents experienced during this period of time in their development as professional counselors.

### **Participants**

Data for this study was obtained from 7 Clinical Mental Health Counseling Master's students enrolled in their first Practicum course. Data included reflections and discussions of critical incidents during the supervised practicum course, which were collected in the form of journal entries. Practicum "provides the application of theory and development of counseling skills under supervision. These experiences will provide opportunities for students to counsel clients who represent the ethnic and demographic diversity of their community," (CACREP, 2009, p. 15). This Practicum course was the first opportunity for each participant to work directly with clients in both individual and group counseling settings. Data was collected over the course of the semester to focus on specific stages of transition and development. During practicum, participants worked in a range of counseling environments and with clients of all ages. Participants were provided the opportunity to include or exclude any specific entry prior to final data collection. Furthermore, all data was reviewed by an external reviewer to remove any identifying information from the responses. Finally, in an extra step taken to ensure



confidentiality for the participants, no identifying or demographic information was formally obtained, although it should be noted that all of the participants were female.

### **Analysis**

The following analysis sought to identify the perceived critical incidents reported by novice counselors-in-training throughout the course of their first practicum experience. The goal of this analysis was to better understand the types of experiences students found most impactful to their development as professional counselors by isolating general themes in the content of the reported critical incidents. This analysis also looked to identify which themes were most likely to occur throughout specific points in the semester in order to get a more nuanced look at the cycle of development that occurred during this initial client contact for these students. The analysis was conducted using the recommendations for researchers employing the transcendental phenomenological approach that was originally proposed by Moustakas (1994), promoted by Creswell (2006), and later refined by Giorgi (2009). This approach has been found to be effective in giving qualitative researchers the appropriate steps and tools to break data down into what is called “meaning units” or themes, then use those themes to create a description of both what happened in a particular experience as well as how the experience was lived. The “textural” description relies on a description of the phenomenon in question, along with verbatim examples, while the “structural” description discusses the context in which the events occurred (Creswell, 2006). For this study, the researcher looked to identify specific themes regarding the types of critical incidents experienced across the beginning, middle, and end of the semester for counselors-in-training enrolled in their first practicum. In addition, the overall theme of what the semester was like for these students across all points were identified. The textural descriptions of the themes occurring within and across these particular periods of

time are accompanied by the structural description of the context in which these reported critical incidents occurred.

In this approach, it is important for the researcher analyzing the data to have bracketed off previous experiences that might have an influence on their perception of the data before undertaking analysis (Moustakas, 1994; Giorgi, 2009). Given that the data used for this study was previously collected, the researcher was able to complete this bracketing before gaining access to the data for analysis. In addition, the researcher was further ensured against experiencing bias throughout the process of analysis of data by not having had a personal or supervisory relationship with any of the participants nor participation in the process of data collection.

The professor teaching the practicum course and responsible for collecting the data had students electronically submit their reflective journal entries via the website Dropbox ([www.dropbox.com](http://www.dropbox.com)). This professor was the only one with access to these files prior to sharing them with the researcher. These journal entries were not made available for analysis until the completion of the course in Fall 2012, at which time students were given the opportunity to withdraw their reflections from consideration for analysis. The Dropbox website ensures security, and therefore confidentiality of materials, by requiring a specific link be sent to an individual by a folder's creator in order for them to gain access to the files contained within. Journal entries were made accessible to the researcher by the professor via this method only after identifying information was removed entirely. Access to the data was also shared via Dropbox with a qualified qualitative researcher so that the results of the analysis could be confirmed by a secondary source. This researcher was chosen given her prior experience with qualitative research and because she had no relationship or history with the participants. Once the primary

researcher gained access to the files, journal entries were printed for hand analysis. Journal entries were stored in a filing cabinet at the researcher's home when not being examined.

Data was arranged longitudinally and in a way that allowed for a look at responses across participants within particular periods of time throughout the semester. This procedure follows the required framework for the transcendental phenomenological approach, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Entries were stratified by due dates that occurred in the beginning, middle, and end of the semester of Fall 2012 in which the data was collected. There were three entries due per participant per time period, plus a final entry that was written as a structured response to question prompts. Participants 1, 3, and 4 each wrote only two entries during the end portion of the semester. Participant 4 also failed to answer the final set of questions requested for Journal Entry 10. This resulted in a total of 59 reflective journal entries and 6 journal responses to be included for analysis. The groups of entries were labeled Beginning Data, Middle Data, End Data, and Final Data respectively.

As recommended by Giorgi (2009), the researcher initially began the analysis process by simply reading through the journal entries in order to become familiar with their content. At this time, no attempt was made to deduce information from the entries themselves. Once all of the entries were read, a methodical phenomenological analysis was begun in which the researcher sought to identify the critical incident/s reported by the participant in each entry as having had an impact on their development or growth as a counselor. The researcher once again read the entries for their content, but this time the entries were interpreted using this question as a guide: What is the perceived critical incident for this counselor-in-training in this journal entry? Care was taken to only read for the content that was deemed relevant specifically by the novice counselors themselves. Some entries contained one main critical incident, while others referred to more than

one. Statements referring to the reported critical incidents being experienced by these counselors-in-training were underlined and then the content summarized for overall theme. At this phase, these summaries were handwritten in the margins of the entries themselves. Some students clearly stated, “One critical incident was...” while others were less clear. In cases in which the student did not explicitly identify the critical incident, the researcher looked for the primary theme of the journal entry. If, for instance, the participant talked about a session with a client, the researcher would note what the counselor found most impactful or notable about the session. Or if the reflection discussed frustration with not getting enough direct hours, that would simply be noted as the primary perceived critical incident facing the student at that time. In the process of analysis, all statements within the text referring to the primary theme, or critical incident, of the reflection would be underlined, while the overall feel of the reflection was recorded as the critical incident itself. This process of noting specific elements within the reflection that support the overall theme is referred to as the identification of significant statements (Moustakas, 1994).

Once each entry in a section had been coded in this way, the critical incident summaries were combined for each participant for each section. For example, with the Beginning Data the researcher combined all of the beginning critical incident summaries reported by Participant 1 together, then with Participant 2, etc. until all of the summaries were grouped together in one place, but still divided by participant. Once all of the critical incidents in each section were combined, themes reflecting the overall experiences of these students could be identified. This process involves taking significant statements and combining them to create themes or “meaning units” (Creswell, 2006). In this case, similar critical incident summaries and their corresponding significant statements found to occur across multiple participants were combined

within each section. Once a group of similar statements across participants within a section were collected, the group was finally given a name representing the general theme of statements. The types of similar reported critical incidents determined the number of themes per section, as themes were deemed to be complete once no critical incidents were left to be grouped. Each section comprised of the beginning, middle, end, and final data was read, coded, and themed completely before the next, starting from the beginning and working to the end. These determined themes reflect what was discovered as the most commonly perceived critical incidents for this group of counselors-in-training across three different periods of time throughout the semester.

Once each section had been coded and themed, the themes derived from each section were able to be combined to represent an Overall Theme reflecting the general experiences of these counselors-in-training during their first Practicum experience. This allowed for a more generalized look at what one might have expected the practicum experience to be like for this particular group of counseling students. The following are the results of the analysis of this data and the determined themes for each section in addition to the overall theme. Each set of themes is followed by both a textural and structural description of the findings as recommended by Creswell (2006) and Giorgi (2009).

### **Beginning Data**

**Identified Critical Incidents.** Table 1 contains the original critical incident summaries derived for each participant from the journal entries collected at the beginning of the semester. These summaries were created by asking the question when reading journal entries: What do these counselors-in-training identify as critical incidents in their development as counselors?

Table 1

Student 1	<p>Concern regarding overall well-being and self-care</p> <p>Concern regarding schedule management</p> <p>Surprise at meeting with clients immediately</p> <p>Perceived “wasting” of time on site—lack of direct hours</p> <p>Concern regarding properly following site protocol—suicide assessment</p>
Student 2	<p>Concern regarding witnessing unethical behavior at site</p> <p>Concern regarding lack of direction/organization at site</p> <p>Concern regarding receiving enough direct hours</p> <p>Concern regarding not having enough time with consumers</p>
Student 3	<p>Concern regarding getting enough hours</p> <p>Concern regarding properly filling out paperwork</p> <p>Relief at getting to work with “familiar” client material</p> <p>Responding positively to video about vulnerability shared in group supervision—connected content to working with clients</p>
Student 4	<p>Concern regarding appropriately applying counseling skills</p> <p>Concern regarding receiving enough direct hours</p> <p>Concern regarding schedule management</p> <p>Processing supervision content—thinking about being more intentional</p> <p>Managing transference—relating personally to client issue</p> <p>Processing complex/sad client material</p> <p>Managing client and personal emotions</p> <p>Learning how to build rapport with someone different from student</p>

Student 5	<p>Concern regarding meeting Practicum expectations</p> <p>Concern regarding counseling skills and informed consent</p> <p>Learning/processing the application of counseling skills in session—surprise at efficacy</p> <p>Learning how to manage session</p> <p>Processing positive supervision experiences</p> <p>Application of supervisor feedback</p>
Student 6	<p>Anxiety regarding starting Practicum—worry about competence</p> <p>Concern regarding developing theoretical orientation</p> <p>Concern regarding managing counseling session</p> <p>Concern regarding receiving enough direct hours</p> <p>Supervision experiences—processing fear/concerns</p> <p>Engaging in role play in supervision—practicing building rapport/sitting with client content</p> <p>Successfully managing resistant client/personal attack</p>
Student 7	<p>Concerns regarding managing time/schedule</p> <p>Concerns regarding properly applying counseling skills</p> <p>Fears regarding self-care/burnout</p> <p>Successfully managing client in stressful situation</p> <p>Being rejected by client</p> <p>Learning how to build rapport while obtaining information</p> <p>Applying counseling skills</p> <p>Concern regarding getting enough taped hours</p>

**Beginning Themes.** Table 2 reflects the themes derived from the critical incident statements collected from the Beginning Data.

Table 2

<p>Management of the Practicum Experience</p>	<p>Concern regarding receiving enough direct hours</p> <p>Concern regarding receiving enough direct hours</p> <p>Concern regarding getting enough hours</p> <p>Concern regarding getting enough taped hours</p> <p>Perceived “wasting” of time on site—lack of direct hours</p> <p>Concern regarding not having enough time with consumers</p> <p>Concern regarding meeting Practicum expectations</p> <p>Concern regarding properly filling out paperwork</p> <p>Concern regarding receiving enough direct hours</p> <p>Concerns regarding managing time/schedule</p> <p>Concern regarding schedule management</p> <p>Concern regarding schedule management</p> <p>Concern regarding overall well-being and self-care</p> <p>Fears regarding self-care/burnout</p> <p>Anxiety regarding starting Practicum—worry about competence</p> <p>Concern regarding witnessing unethical behavior at site</p> <p>Concern regarding lack of direction/organization at site</p>
<p>Development of Counselor Skills</p>	<p>Concern regarding developing theoretical orientation</p> <p>Concerns regarding properly applying counseling skills</p> <p>Successfully managing client in stressful situation</p>



	<p>Learning how to build rapport while obtaining information</p> <p>Applying counseling skills</p> <p>Concern regarding appropriately applying counseling skills</p> <p>Concern regarding counseling skills and informed consent</p> <p>Learning/processing the application of counseling skills in session—surprise at efficacy</p> <p>Learning how to manage session</p> <p>Successfully managing resistant client/personal attack</p> <p>Being rejected by client</p> <p>Surprise at meeting with clients immediately</p> <p>Concern regarding properly following site protocol—suicide assessment</p> <p>Concern regarding managing counseling session</p> <p>Learning how to build rapport with someone different from student</p>
<p>Responding/Relating Personally to Client Content</p>	<p>Relief at getting to work with “familiar” client material</p> <p>Responding positively to video about vulnerability shared in group supervision—connected content to working with clients</p> <p>Managing countertransference—relating personally to client issue</p> <p>Processing complex/sad client material</p> <p>Managing client and personal emotions</p>
<p>Supervision</p>	<p>Processing positive supervision experiences</p> <p>Application of supervisor feedback</p> <p>Supervision experiences—processing fear/concerns</p> <p>Engaging in role play in supervision—practicing building rapport/sitting with client content</p>

*Textural Description of Beginning Themes.* The following is a description of the students' reported critical incidents.

*Management of Practicum Experience.* Concern regarding the students' perceived ability to successfully and appropriately manage the practicum experience was the most common critical incident reported in the beginning set of data. Students primarily expressed concern related to being able to manage the scheduling required for practicum and to obtain all of the required direct hours throughout the course of the semester. Students frequently reported feeling anxious or worried regarding the beginning of the process in general. Students also discussed being worried about maintaining self-care and avoiding burnout. In addition, some students expressed concern with site disorganization and the need to find their fit or find clarity within their setting. Statements reflecting this theme include:

“Another present concerns seems to reside in whether or not I can handle all that this semester will require as far as course load, working, and committing fully to my Practicum site.”

“My biggest concern about practicum is not getting enough hours.”

“Now that I am more familiar with what is required to complete Practicum, I am overwhelmed!”

“I have a bad habit of overthinking things, and I think that I have been doing this with my expectations for practicum.”

*Development of Counselor Skills.* The next most frequently reported critical incident in the beginning data was found to relate to students processing their application of counseling skills. In the first entries written before client contact, multiple students discussed concern related to remembering how to appropriately use previously learned skills in a counseling

session. As students began to meet with clients, they frequently reported these encounters as being meaningful and frequently processed their role and choices they made in the initial session. Students frequently reported seeking the ability to effectively manage counseling sessions. Students also reported learning to work with difficult or resistant clients. Statements reflective of this theme are:

“Simply exercising my skills today is already making me feel like I’m progressing as a future professional counselor.”

“I know that I make mistakes in every session, but I do catch myself being aware of some of those mistakes. For example, today when I was listening to my client, I crossed my arms... I immediately uncrossed them because I remember learning that this gesture implies that you are closed off from your client or not interested in what they are saying.”

“I feel that I have grown a lot and developed a lot of skills that will really help me navigate my way through sessions. I am worried that some of the things that clients disclose will catch me off guard and that I will be unsure of how to respond or where to go with them.”

“In this session I felt like I got to ask more questions and I really enjoyed it.”

*Responding/Relating Personally to Client Content.* The next most commonly reported critical incident in the beginning was related to processing complex or difficult client content. In these reflections, students expressed relief when having the opportunity to work with a client that seemed familiar and confusion when faced with clients perceived as different from them. Clients were reported to solicit personal emotions within the counselors-in-training, leading to students discussing the need to manage these emotions in session. Statements reflecting this theme include:

“One of my students that day was an especially enjoyable experience because of her background and what she was interested in.”

“Being that this girl was so young, the ability to make a decision of this magnitude was incomprehensible to me.”

“These two clients that I had made me worried about working with children.”

*Supervision.* Finally, students discussed preparing for supervision as well as their initial supervision experiences. Critical incidents related to processing what happened in supervision as well as attempting to incorporate feedback given in supervision were reported. Additionally, students discussed the ways in which supervisors were able to process fears related to conducting counseling. While most students primarily discussed supervision with their University supervisor, a couple also mentioned experiences with site supervisors as well. Statements reflecting the impact of early Supervision experiences include:

“Through our three meetings so far, there are some things that (my supervisor) has challenged me with that I have been thinking a lot about.”

“One of my “critical incidents” that I have experienced so far would have to be my experiences with my individual supervisor...My supervisor and I get along really well and so I felt comfortable as possible letting him see how I approach counseling.”

“I am also thankful for my individual supervisor. She is very good at providing positive feedback as well as constructive criticism.”

“I feel as though I am developing positive relationships with the staff and an even more positive relationship with my site supervisor.”

*Structural Description of Beginning Themes.* The beginning data was collected over the first six weeks of the semester. Initial entries revealed a high level of anxiety for most

participants. Most participants were able to quickly become acclimated to their sites, while for others the sites were more disorganized and the ability to receive direct hours took more time. The majority of participants were primarily concerned with the task of successfully completing their first practicum course. Success for most of these students was reported as receiving enough hours and appropriately following protocol. Students also reported incidents involving the application of counseling skills as being highly impactful on their development as a counselor. As counselors-in-training began to have more client experiences, discussion involving the need to process client material increased. Finally, students highlighted supervision as being influential in their ability to get feedback, process concerns, and practice skills.

**Middle Data**

**Identified Critical Incidents.** Table 3 contains the original critical incident summaries derived for each participant from the journal entries collected in the middle of the semester. These summaries were created by asking the question when reading journal entries: What do these counselors-in-training identify as critical incidents in their development as counselors?

Table 3

Student 1	<p>Concern regarding receiving enough direct hours</p> <p>Dissatisfaction with school environment</p> <p>Feeling unrecognized/unappreciated in group supervision</p> <p>Enjoying site experiences more than class experiences</p> <p>Confusion/frustration over differences between what’s learned in class and what’s expected at site</p> <p>Self-care—learning to release client issues</p> <p>Managing life stress in conjunction with Practicum</p> <p>Acknowledging development of theoretical orientation—using specific interventions</p>
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	Concern regarding receiving enough direct hours
Student 2	<p>Learning how to incorporate interventions/follow protocol</p> <p>Processing supervision feedback—displaying empathy, managing emotions</p> <p>Managing anxiety in session/beliefs about the impact of counseling</p> <p>Feeling uncomfortable in the counselor role</p> <p>Finding comfort through switching to a new population</p>
Student 3	<p>Difficulty receiving permission to meet with client from site supervisor</p> <p>Managing situation with site supervisor</p> <p>Learning how to meet client expectations</p> <p>Incorporating supervision feedback—using more open-ended questions, learning how to display empathy</p>
Student 4	<p>Processing personal life experiences leading to countertransference in session</p> <p>Learning how to express empathy using silence—being intentional</p> <p>Developing treatment planning skills</p> <p>Processing client content and experiences—finding comfort in session</p> <p>Noting increased ability to be approachable and create rapport</p>
Student 5	<p>Frustration with Practicum—hectic schedule/lack of self-care</p> <p>Reflection upon Counseling degree as a part of career path</p> <p>Learning to value counseling skills</p> <p>Gaining comfort/confidence working with clients</p> <p>Being thankful for positive supervision experiences</p>
Student 6	Managing suicidal client—following protocol, managing emotions of self-efficacy post-session, applying skills

	<p>Positive supervision—role play focused on reflecting feeling</p> <p>Noting positive change in clients</p> <p>Learning how to manage sessions</p> <p>Increasing ability to reflect feelings/process feelings</p>
Student 7	<p>Difficulty working with “preferred” population—frustration/confusion over failed intervention</p> <p>Processing client content—noting issues of countertransference</p> <p>Successfully incorporating interventions with “preferred” population</p>

**Middle Themes.** Table 4 reflects the themes derived from the critical incident statements derived from the Middle Data.

Table 4

Development of Counselor Skills	<p>Learning how to meet client expectations</p> <p>Learning how to incorporate interventions/follow protocol</p> <p>Acknowledging development of theoretical orientation—using specific interventions</p> <p>Managing anxiety in session/beliefs about the impact of counseling</p> <p>Feeling uncomfortable in the counselor role</p> <p>Finding comfort through switching to a new population</p> <p>Learning how to express empathy using silence—being intentional</p> <p>Developing treatment planning skills</p> <p>Noting increased ability to be approachable and create rapport</p> <p>Learning to value counseling skills</p>
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	<p>Gaining comfort/confidence working with clients</p> <p>Noting positive change in clients</p> <p>Learning how to manage sessions</p> <p>Increasing ability to reflect feelings/process feelings</p> <p>Reflection upon Counseling degree as a part of career path</p> <p>Managing suicidal client—following protocol, managing emotions of self-efficacy post-session, applying skills</p> <p>Difficulty working with “preferred” population—frustration/confusion over failed intervention</p> <p>Successfully incorporating interventions with “preferred” population</p>
Management of the Practicum Experience	<p>Concern regarding receiving enough direct hours</p> <p>Concern regarding receiving enough direct hours</p> <p>Dissatisfaction with school environment</p> <p>Enjoying site experiences more than class experiences</p> <p>Confusion/frustration over differences between what’s learned in class and what’s expected at site</p> <p>Managing life stress in conjunction with Practicum</p> <p>Frustration with Practicum—hectic schedule/lack of self-care</p> <p>Difficulty receiving permission to meet with client from site supervisor</p> <p>Managing situation with site supervisor</p>
Supervision	<p>Processing supervision feedback—displaying empathy, managing emotions</p> <p>Incorporating supervision feedback—using more open-ended questions, learning how to display empathy</p> <p>Being thankful for positive supervision experiences</p>



	Feeling unrecognized/unappreciated in group supervision
Client Content/Countertransference	Processing personal life experiences leading to countertransference in session Processing client content and experiences—finding comfort in session Processing client content—noting issues of countertransference Self-care—learning to release client issues

***Textural Description of Middle Themes.*** The following is a description of the students’ reported critical incidents.

*Development of Counselor Skills.* The most frequently discussed critical incidents in the middle data revolved about the development of counseling skills. Students discussed the need to manage their own anxiety in session, the use of specific interventions in session, the development of treatment planning skills, and the role of a counselor in general. They also talked about attempting to incorporate specific skills such as displaying empathy, using silence, reflecting feelings, and building rapport. Students also explored their theoretical orientations. Statements reflective of this theme are:

“I need to work on structuring sessions so the client and I don’t get lost. I also need to continue to practice reflecting feelings with clients.”

“During this practicum experience, I have really realized what an asset my counseling skills are to me as an advisor.”

“In no way do I think im perfect, I still cringe at some of the things I say in tapes, but I do think I am sounding more confident and approachable which helps with the rapport I am trying to build with my clients.”

“I find myself asking a good open ended question, but then I keep talking and end up making it closed ended.”

“It isn’t set in stone but I am starting to feel myself lean more towards Psychodynamic theory.”

“It was really hard to decide how best to balance the “expert” role.”

*Management of Practicum Experience.* Students also continued to discuss the Practicum experience itself. Some students had concern regarding getting enough direct hours and others expressed dissatisfaction with their site. Participants discussed having conversations with site supervisors about their needs as practicum students. Students also talked about exhaustion related to busy schedules and personal life events. Examples of statements that are reflective of the management of the Practicum experience include:

“It was a really good experience to discuss some things that had been concerning me in a professional way.”

“On top of all my responsibilities and activities, practicum is exhausting... Because of the increased stress, I feel overwhelmed and just plain tired.”

“For example, last week I was scheduled to see 5 clients in one day. Of those five only one client showed up.”

“I feel more comfortable with my site, now that I have a set consistent schedule.”

*Supervision.* Supervision also continued to be reported as impactful to counselor development by these trainees. They discussed continuing to attempt to incorporate supervisor feedback. Students reflected on the fact that supervisors are often helpful in pointing out areas to work on. One student reported struggling to be heard in group supervision. Statements highlighting the content of this theme are:

“In supervision (my supervisor) has pointed out a few times I could have used empathy and I am beginning to see moments that I can try using it.”

“One critical incident that changed this thinking for me was with my doctoral supervisor.”

“I have said this several times, but I am so thankful for supervision and specifically my supervisor. Every week, she presents ideas and helps me think through each client session.”

*Processing Client Content/Countertransference.* For one student in particular, this stage of the data marked an increase need to work through personal issues leading to countertransference in session. Other students discussed self-care and learning how to release client issues. While present, these types of critical incidents were the least likely to be reported in this section. Statements reminiscent of this theme are:

“I always thought it gave me a leg up to have gone through some of the things I have in my life, but I’m beginning to feel like it’s a bit of a detraction.”

“This story hit close to home because I personally have gone through infidelity in a relationship after being together for many years.”

“Also, I am getting better at not dwelling on my client’s issues. I find simply consulting with another staff counselor helps me process and release this information not needed in my head.”

*Structural Description of Middle Themes.* The Middle Data was primarily characterized by a focus on the development of skills needed to be an effective counselor. Counselors-in-training at this phase of practicum were, for the most part, meeting regularly with clients and beginning to incorporate more complex counseling and treatment planning skills. Students focused on being able to manage sessions and reveled in seeing positive change in clients. Some students continued to seek to find their footing within the practicum experience and had to advocate for themselves professionally at their sites. While supervision was not discussed by all

participants, some students found the process extremely important and influential on their development thus far. Finally, some students found that working with clients was emotionally draining. These students engaged in highly reflective personal journaling and sought outside resources for additional support.

**End Data**

**Identified Critical Incidents.** Table 5 contains the original critical incident summaries derived for each participant from the journal entries collected at the end of the semester. These summaries were created by asking the question when reading journal entries: What do these counselors-in-training identify as critical incidents in their development as counselors?

Table 5

Student 1	<p>Getting opportunity to facilitate children’s group—building rapport, frustration with perceived outdated resources</p> <p>Frustration with not getting enough direct hours</p> <p>Enjoying process of co-counseling—viewing different styles and approaches</p>
Student 2	<p>Ethics—managing mandatory reporting, concern regarding counseling relationship</p> <p>Difficulty managing/processing perceived unethical behavior by site director</p> <p>Experiences in co-counseling—viewing different styles and approaches</p> <p>Developing skills/interventions for working with grief</p>
Student 3	<p>Processing supervisor feedback—thankful, encouraged student to “go deeper”</p> <p>Gaining counseling skills—asking open-ended questions</p> <p>Learning how to self-reflect</p> <p>Addressing current climate in counseling profession—concern regarding licensure</p>
Student 4	<p>Processing countertransference related to grief—learning how to manage emotion in session, appropriate use of self-disclosure</p>

	<p>Learning how to balance and understand personal emotions</p> <p>Concern regarding personal boundaries—confidentiality in personal counseling</p>
Student 5	<p>**No critical incident noted</p> <p>Desiring to expand population experiences</p> <p>Noting importance of the counseling relationship</p>
Student 6	<p>Processing positive client experiences—affirmed in counselor role</p> <p>Successfully applying skills—reflecting feeling, using nonverbal as cues</p> <p>Successfully building rapport with new population</p> <p>Positive supervision experience—learning to trust self, strong personal and professional growth</p> <p>Confirmation of theoretical orientation</p>
Student 7	<p>Getting “second chance” with client—choosing appropriate intervention</p> <p>Managing countertransference</p> <p>Processing group work—successfully incorporating interventions</p> <p>Applying counseling skills—appropriate use of confrontation</p>

**End Themes.** Table 6 reflects the themes derived from the critical incident statements derived from the End Data.

Table 6

Development of Counselor Skills	<p>Ethics—managing mandatory reporting, concern regarding counseling relationship</p> <p>Developing skills/interventions for working with grief</p> <p>Getting opportunity to facilitate children’s group—building rapport, frustration with perceived outdated resources</p>
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	<p>Gaining counseling skills—asking open-ended questions</p> <p>Successfully applying skills—reflecting feeling, using nonverbal as cues</p> <p>Successfully building rapport with new population</p> <p>Getting “second chance” with client—choosing appropriate intervention</p> <p>Processing group work—successfully incorporating interventions</p> <p>Applying counseling skills—appropriate use of confrontation</p>
<p>Development of Professional Counselor Identity</p>	<p>Desiring to expand population experiences</p> <p>Noting importance of the counseling relationship</p> <p>Processing positive client experiences—affirmed in counselor role</p> <p>Addressing current climate in counseling profession—concern regarding licensure</p> <p>Enjoying process of co-counseling—viewing different styles and approaches</p> <p>Experiences in co-counseling—viewing different styles and approaches</p> <p>Confirmation of theoretical orientation</p>
<p>Personal Emotions/Countertransference</p>	<p>Processing countertransference related to grief—learning how to manage emotion in session, appropriate use of self-disclosure</p> <p>Learning how to balance and understand personal emotions</p> <p>Managing countertransference</p>

	Concern regarding personal boundaries— confidentiality in personal counseling
Supervision	Processing supervisor feedback—thankful, encouraged student to “go deeper”  Learning how to self-reflect- supervision  Positive supervision experience—learning to trust self, strong personal and professional growth
Management of Practicum Experience	Frustration with not getting enough direct hours  Difficulty managing/processing perceived unethical behavior by site director

***Textural Description of End Themes.*** The following is a description of the student’s reported critical incidents.

*Development of Counselor Skills.* Students continued to most often report critical incidents related to applying counseling skills. Students discussed making ethical decisions and choosing appropriate interventions. They also discussed excitement at accomplishing the goal of reaching certain skills levels. Students also processed getting to apply skills across diverse populations. Statements referring to these experiences include:

“I would just like to learn better ways of helping my client cope with this grief.”

“Another critical incident happened when I reflected the client’s feelings back to her.”

“I had to do my first mandatory report after my client disclosed to me that she had self-harmed the night before.”

“I have definitely learned that kids can be difficult to work with, but sometimes they may surprise you.”

*Development of Professional Counselor Identity.* Students in the End Data also discussed their professional development in more detail than previous sections of data. Participants talked about their desire to expand the diversity of their client experiences, the impact of co-counseling on development, and the current climate in the counseling profession regarding licensure. Also, students remarked on the realization of the importance of the counseling relationship. Students also processed positive client experiences that were affirming to them in the counselor role. A few statements that are reflective of this theme are:

“This past week I have enjoyed participating in co-counseling sessions with staff counselors at my site... I also really like the idea of learning various styles of counseling from the staff counselors and taking bits from each and developing my own style.”

“Next semester, during internship, I would like to try to diversify my client base.”

“One important concept that I have learned in my graduate studies, is the importance of the counseling relationship, and I find that this concept is equally important in advising.”

“Throughout practicum, I was so concerned with trying to be who I thought I was supposed to be as a counselor, or more like my peers as a counselor, or my supervisor, or my professors. I realized that this was inhibiting the counseling relationship because I was not being genuine.”

“I think my drive to succeed and caring for my clients goes hand in hand, especially because I believe that my drive’s main source comes from my desire to offer the best service possible to future and current clients.”

*Personal Emotions/Countertransference.* Students also continued to report struggles with personal issues and countertransference. A primary focus was for students to learn how to balance and understand personal emotions both in and out of sessions with clients. This theme is reflected in statements such as:



“I found myself struggling with this because I can relate to it. However, it wasn’t difficult for me to disconnect myself from this little boy, because once I become too emotional it’s hard for me to get over it.”

“Since I am very critical of myself, I have a hard time trusting myself.”

“This was a bit difficult for me, with the grief issues that I have personally, but I felt like I really was present in the session and able to help her process some of those feelings.”

*Supervision.* A few students reported highly impactful supervision experiences. Students reported that supervisors were vital in their ability to better self-reflect and to trust themselves. These positive supervision experiences were stated to be linked to perceived growth in these counselors. Statements reflective of this theme are:

“(My supervisor) encourages and fosters moments of deeper thought and introspection. This is a skill I will have to work on throughout next spring and summer during internship.”

“My supervisor pointed out to me that by me just being there for her and with her, that was enough. I let that sink in for a while because that word constantly haunts me, ‘enough’.”

“Supervision was my favorite part of practicum. Without my supervisor and the whole supervision process I would not be where I am today.”

*Management of Practicum Experience.* While the least reported type of critical incident in the end data, some students reported struggling to receive enough direct hours up to the end of the semester. Students also reported witnessing and coping with unethical behavior at their site. Statements reflective of this theme are:

“I have well over a 120 documented administrative hours at my site however at this point I have only 10 hours that are considered direct/individual counseling hours.”

“This incident really bothered me for different reasons, one reason it bothered me is because it is very unethical and I have run into an ethics problem with the executive director before...”

**Structural Description of End Themes.** Student critical incidents were primarily focused on skill and professional development in the end data. Some students had more than enough direct hours, while others did not receive enough. Students discussed learning how to intentionally apply skills and talked about steps to take in the future for professional development. Some students also continued to struggle with personal concerns while others had breakthroughs in supervision. Finally, a few students reported continuing to successfully manage the practicum course right up to the end of the semester.

**Structured Journal Entry Response.** Table 7 reflects the question prompts and responses to those prompts from the final journal entry. Given the limited number of clear responses across all categories, this data was not included in the creation of themes.

Table 7

Perspective about the counseling process	Different clients require different approaches Can never be too sure about what to expect Many variables play role
Learned about the counseling relationship	Have to work to maintain it Rapport important Must understand needs of client Grows over time Most crucial aspect of counseling
Greatest challenge	“Being in my head”; Feeling overwhelmed Not getting enough direct hours

	<p>Lack of client diversity</p> <p>Trusting self as a counselor</p>
Specific positive use of intervention	<p>Incorporating a drawing activity to get a client engaged</p> <p>Meeting clients where they are</p> <p>Clarifying the decision-making process</p> <p>Using reflection</p> <p>Appropriately modifying role play intervention for client</p>
Addressing diversity	<p>Not sure</p> <p>Reported no diversity of clients</p> <p>Work with international students</p> <p>Understanding that client cultures are different</p>
Theoretical foundation and growth	<p>Narrowed down- CBT and person-centered</p> <p>Person-centered “not productive”— psychodynamic, CBT, Motivational Interviewing</p> <p>Solution-focused</p> <p>Not sure- Cognitive and Solution-focused</p> <p>Started psychodynamic, ended Person-centered</p>
How developed as counselor	<p>Working with children is hard; Important to be prepared for each session</p> <p>Impact of theoretical orientation, not getting to plan ahead</p> <p>Knowing what direction to take</p> <p>Learning to trust self as a counselor</p>

Goals during Internship	<p>Grow more comfortable; work with adults; professional development</p> <p>Asking good, open-ended questions</p> <p>Diversify clientele</p> <p>Continue to trust self</p>
Significant learning moments in supervision	<p>Realizing that you can't "save the world"</p> <p>Importance of going deeper with clients</p> <p>Being able to have questions answered; Looking at situations from different angles</p>
Limitations from supervision	<p>None</p> <p>Concern about not having supervisor for Internship</p>

### Overall Themes

The following is a compilation of the Beginning Themes, Middle Themes, and End Themes. Together, these themes represent the primary critical incidents experienced throughout the semester by novice counselors-in-training engaged in their first Practicum experience.

Table 8

Development of Counselor Skills	<p>Concern regarding developing theoretical orientation</p> <p>Concerns regarding properly applying counseling skills</p> <p>Successfully managing client in stressful situation</p> <p>Learning how to build rapport while obtaining information</p> <p>Applying counseling skills</p> <p>Concern regarding appropriately applying counseling skills</p>
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	<p>Concern regarding counseling skills and informed consent</p> <p>Learning/processing the application of counseling skills in session—surprise at efficacy</p> <p>Learning how to manage session</p> <p>Successfully managing resistant client/personal attack</p> <p>Being rejected by client</p> <p>Surprise at meeting with clients immediately</p> <p>Concern regarding properly following site protocol—suicide assessment</p> <p>Concern regarding managing counseling session</p> <p>Learning how to meet client expectations</p> <p>Learning how to incorporate interventions/follow protocol</p> <p>Acknowledging development of theoretical orientation—using specific interventions</p> <p>Managing anxiety in session/beliefs about the impact of counseling</p> <p>Feeling uncomfortable in the counselor role</p> <p>Finding comfort through switching to a new population</p> <p>Learning how to express empathy using silence—being intentional</p> <p>Developing treatment planning skills</p> <p>Noting increased ability to be approachable and create rapport</p> <p>Learning to value counseling skills</p> <p>Gaining comfort/confidence working with clients</p> <p>Noting positive change in clients</p> <p>Learning how to manage sessions</p>
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	<p>Increasing ability to reflect feelings/process feelings</p> <p>Reflection upon Counseling degree as a part of career path</p> <p>Managing suicidal client—following protocol, managing emotions of self-efficacy post-session, applying skills</p> <p>Difficulty working with “preferred” population—frustration/confusion over failed intervention</p> <p>Successfully incorporating interventions with “preferred” population</p> <p>Ethics—managing mandatory reporting, concern regarding counseling relationship</p> <p>Developing skills/interventions for working with grief</p> <p>Getting opportunity to facilitate children’s group—building rapport, frustration with perceived outdated resources</p> <p>Gaining counseling skills—asking open-ended questions</p> <p>Successfully applying skills—reflecting feeling, using nonverbal as cues</p> <p>Successfully building rapport with new population</p> <p>Getting “second chance” with client—choosing appropriate intervention</p> <p>Processing group work—successfully incorporating interventions</p> <p>Applying counseling skills—appropriate use of confrontation</p> <p>Confirmation of theoretical orientation</p>
<p>Management of Practicum Experience</p>	<p>Concern regarding receiving enough direct hours</p> <p>Concern regarding receiving enough direct hours</p> <p>Concern regarding getting enough hours</p> <p>Concern regarding getting enough taped hours</p> <p>Perceived “wasting” of time on site—lack of direct hours</p>

	<p>Concern regarding not having enough time with consumers</p> <p>Concern regarding meeting Practicum expectations</p> <p>Concern regarding properly filling out paperwork</p> <p>Concern regarding witnessing unethical behavior at site</p> <p>Concern regarding lack of direction/organization at site</p> <p>Concern regarding receiving enough direct hours</p> <p>Concerns regarding managing time/schedule</p> <p>Concern regarding schedule management</p> <p>Concern regarding schedule management</p> <p>Concern regarding overall well-being and self-care</p> <p>Fears regarding self-care/burnout</p> <p>Anxiety regarding starting Practicum—worry about competence</p> <p>Concern regarding receiving enough direct hours</p> <p>Concern regarding receiving enough direct hours</p> <p>Dissatisfaction with school environment</p> <p>Enjoying site experiences more than class experiences</p> <p>Confusion/frustration over differences between what's learned in class and what's expected at site</p> <p>Managing life stress in conjunction with Practicum</p> <p>Difficulty receiving permission to meet with client from site supervisor</p> <p>Managing situation with site supervisor</p> <p>Frustration with Practicum—hectic schedule/lack of self-care</p> <p>Frustration with not getting enough direct hours</p>
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	Difficulty managing/processing perceived unethical behavior by site director
Supervision	<p>Processing positive supervision experiences</p> <p>Application of supervisor feedback</p> <p>Supervision experiences—processing fear/concerns</p> <p>Engaging in role play in supervision—practicing building rapport/sitting with client content</p> <p>Processing supervision content—thinking about being more intentional</p> <p>Processing supervision feedback—displaying empathy, managing emotions</p> <p>Incorporating supervision feedback—using more open-ended questions, learning how to display empathy</p> <p>Being thankful for positive supervision experiences</p> <p>Feeling unrecognized/unappreciated in group supervision</p> <p>Processing supervisor feedback—thankful, encouraged student to “go deeper”</p> <p>Learning how to self-reflect- supervision</p> <p>Positive supervision experience—learning to trust self, strong personal and professional growth</p>
Managing Personal Emotions	<p>Relief at getting to work with “familiar” client material</p> <p>Responding positively to video about vulnerability shared in group supervision—connected content to working with clients</p> <p>Managing transference—relating personally to client issue</p> <p>Processing complex/sad client material</p> <p>Managing client and personal emotions</p> <p>Learning how to build rapport with someone different from student</p>



	<p>Processing personal life experiences leading to countertransference in session</p> <p>Processing client content and experiences—finding comfort in session</p> <p>Processing client content—noting issues of countertransference</p> <p>Self-care—learning to release client issues</p> <p>Processing countertransference related to grief—learning how to manage emotion in session, appropriate use of self-disclosure</p> <p>Learning how to balance and understand personal emotions</p> <p>Managing countertransference</p> <p>Concern regarding personal boundaries—confidentiality in personal counseling</p>
<p>Development of Professional Counselor Identity</p>	<p>Desiring to expand population experiences</p> <p>Noting importance of the counseling relationship</p> <p>Processing positive client experiences—affirmed in counselor role</p> <p>Addressing current climate in counseling profession—concern regarding licensure</p> <p>Enjoying process of co-counseling—viewing different styles and approaches</p> <p>Experiences in co-counseling—viewing different styles and approaches</p>

***Textural Description of Overall Themes.*** The following is a description of the general overall themes reported by the students.

*Development of Counselor Skills.* Critical incidents referencing the development of counseling skills were the most frequently reported by counselors-in-training as being relevant to their development as professional counselors. Counselors discussed learning how to manage

anxiety and sought comfort working across a variety of populations. The incidents also allowed for counselors to incorporate specific counseling skills into their sessions, incorporate interventions, develop treatment plans, and make ethical decisions. Students discussed the desire to become stronger in their ability to create rapport with clients and to become proficient in managing sessions. Finally, students discussed seeking clarification in their theoretical orientation.

*Management of Practicum Experience.* The second most frequently reported incident was the management of the practicum experience. Students began the semester concerned about getting direct hours and being able to adequately manage their time. Students also discussed issues with disorganized sites or unethical personnel. Additionally, students reported burnout and a lack of self-care as the semester progressed. While most students successfully managed the practicum experience, at least one student did fail to adequately meet the number of direct hours required to complete the course.

*Supervision.* The next most frequently reported incidents involved experiences with supervision. Students who discussed their supervisors overwhelmingly reported positive interactions. These interactions were linked to greater levels of self-reflection and confidence in oneself as a counselor. Supervisors also highlighted for students the areas of skill development with which they needed to focus and gave feedback on their process.

*Managing Personal Emotions.* Students also discussed having to learn how to manage personal emotions in order to be effective as counselors. Students reported incidents in which emotions became overwhelming in session and impacted the counselor's ability to work effectively with the client. Students also processed personal emotions that were not necessarily directly related to counseling performance, but that were important to process in order for the

student to grow. Student sought to find comfort in sessions and find balance in managing client and personal content.

*Development of Professional Counselor Identity.* The final theme identified was derived from statements occurring only in the end data. These statements referred to the importance for these students to continue to develop as a counselor. This theme was also represented by counselors-in-training connecting with the importance of the counseling relationship in our field. Experiences in co-counseling were reported as being particularly influential in assisting students in the exploration of personal professional identity.

*Structural Description of Overall Themes.* The practicum experience for these counselors-in-training could be said to have been primarily characterized by a focus on counseling skill development and the need to successfully manage the practicum experience. Students began this experience more focused on the management side, but by the end of the semester were more focused on strengthening their skills and developing their professional identity. Managing personal emotions and client content proved to be a consistent theme for many throughout the process, and supervision was viewed as extremely impactful for others. While there were identifiable themes present among participants, each practicum experience was unique. Students in less organized sites were more concerned with the management of practicum while students reporting positive experiences in supervision were more likely to engage in personally reflective writing. Most students reported overall positive practicum experiences and growth across the course of the semester.

## V. DISCUSSION

The counseling training process has been acknowledged as being extremely impactful on both professional and personal student development. Organizations committed to the training of counselors have continually punctuated the importance of creating learning environments that are best suited for not only imparting counseling content knowledge, but that also promote social-cognitive and moral development in trainees (ACES, 2011; CACREP, 2009). Developmental models of supervision have often been highlighted as being particularly useful to counselor educators and supervisors for helping increase understanding of how novice counselors are expected to develop throughout the course of their training (Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992; Stoltenberg, 1981), however, these models have largely tended to be more theoretical than prescriptive (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). Counseling researchers seeking to understand the developmental process of counselors have periodically applied the critical incident technique, which allows for the closer analysis of what the process of acquiring professional counseling skills and identities may look like in novice counselors. In the current study, critical incidents were processed by counselors-in-training through the use of reflections. These were examined over different stages of the practicum experience.

By increasing understanding regarding this process, it is hoped that counseling educators and supervisors will be better prepared to provide effective educational experiences and supervisory support for counselors-in-training. The purpose of this study was to not only add to the literature on counselor development by identifying the general perceived critical incidents of

counselors-in-training enrolled in their first practicum, but to also take a closer look at the ways in which those perceived incidents evolved throughout the course of the semester. This research may then provide a greater understanding of this development, thus helping to inform professors teaching practicum courses and supervisors working with novice counselors. The following is a review of the findings from this study, implications for counselor educators and supervisors, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

### **Review of Results**

In the beginning stages of practicum, the students' reflections were filled with reported concerns regarding their ability to adequately manage the practicum experience. By this, students relayed fears about everything from being able to manage their schedules and coursework to getting enough direct service hours at their sites. Students also disclosed trepidation related to their competence as counselors. This reported anxiety was not particularly surprising, as research has consistently shown that beginning counselors are often quite nervous and insecure when first meeting with clients (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Stoltenberg, 1981; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Stoltenberg (2005) also found that Level 1 supervisees in particular, typically characterized by those who are in the beginning of their training, generally have little professional experience and present with high anxiety. Similarly, in this study, students appeared to be highly focused on fears related to starting practicum, this included concerns about the basic requirements of practicum as well as their own counseling competence.

Since the process of maintaining the requirements of practicum was a prominent theme, it was not surprising that many students also relayed concerns regarding self-care, particularly those reporting having jobs in addition to school. However, while many students originally reported fear of being unable to juggle all that was required of them, only one student reported a

critical incident related to self-care and scheduling in the entire middle and end data sets. This suggests that while students originally had fears regarding their ability to successfully manage the process, these fears abated over time. In fact, for most students, the reported concerns related to the management of the practicum experience were resolved by the middle of the semester. The one issue about practicum maintenance that seemed to be more lasting for a couple of students was related to meeting hour requirements. For these students, these concerns remained at the forefront as they struggled to receive enough direct service hours at their sites. While their peers were writing journal entries related to things like their ability to effectively manage outbursts in counseling groups and the process of implementing supervisor feedback, these students were discussing discontent with their coursework and group supervision, frustration with site disorganization, and the witnessing of unethical behavior. In addition, a student reporting difficulty receiving enough direct service hours continued to express anxiety while meeting with clients further into the semester than other students. This suggested that early client contact is important for students in order to help face and manage nerves. Paralleling this, students reporting site difficulty also provided less reflective journal entries and expressed more dissatisfaction regarding the practicum experience in general than others.

While one cannot be definitive based on one study, the differences in the content of the perceived critical incidents for students who did not report difficulties with their sites past the beginning of the semester and those who did suggests that site experiences themselves can have an impact on a student's ability to adequately develop professionally throughout the semester. Because of this, counselor educators and supervisors should be mindful if their students report difficulties with their site. By not being able to get enough direct hours or being constantly distracted by issues at the site, the data suggests that students can be put at a disadvantage for not

only moving forward to internship and ultimately graduation, but potentially developmentally as well. Additionally, negative experiences have been found to be extremely influential on professional counselor identity development (Furr & Carroll, 2003). The emergence of high anxiety, particularly at the beginning of the semester, regarding the practicum experience confirmed what prior counseling development researchers have also found—that novice counselors-in-training spend a good deal of energy being anxious about the unknown (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009; Lambie & Sias, 2005; Stoltenberg, 2005). What is interesting to note is that anxiety appeared to dissipate more quickly for students who reported supportive and organized practicum experience environments. This suggests that counselor educators choosing practicum sites should be mindful of the potential for site disorganization or lack of opportunity for students to receive direct service hours. This theme also seemed to suggest that if a supportive environment exists, counselors-in-training will be more likely to focus their energy on their own personal development and less on the more concrete tasks of completing logs and paperwork correctly.

While management of the practicum experience was the most dominant theme in the beginning data, the most commonly reported perceived critical incidents among the participants in this study as a whole pertained to the development of counseling skills. These critical incidents were more frequently reported than any other across the middle and end data sets, with students often reflecting upon individual sessions they had conducted and how they felt they had performed. Consistently from the beginning to the end, students were focused on appropriately and effectively working with clients by using the skills taught to them in their counseling skills course prior to practicum. In the beginning, students primarily expressed concern related to skill development regarding their ability to remember what to say or do. In the middle and end data

sets, however, students reported less worry about what to do and more experiences attempting to incorporate specific skills and interventions into their sessions. Students also discussed wanting to develop more complex skills and become more intentional in session. In the middle of the semester, critical incidents related to the use and application of specific skills began to proliferate. In many of these cases, students would report that their supervisors had helped them see an area for improvement. By the end, students were still seeking to intentionally apply their skills, but some also appeared to be pursuing the development of higher-level skills such as the reflection of feelings and choosing appropriate and timely interventions. One student did report some confusion related to the application of skills stating that the Motivational Interviewing techniques taught in her skills course had never been heard of by the staff at her site. This dissonance between what was taught and what she was witnessing at the site was reported to be quite frustrating for this student. These findings suggest that helping students develop and feel confident in their ability to perform the skills required of a professional counselor are of the utmost importance for students during practicum. While counselor educators and supervisors may have the “ulterior” motive of pushing students towards personal and professional growth in addition to them acquiring counseling skills, the data seemed to insinuate that students look at skill development as the primary goal of their practicum experience. Students who reported more confidence in their skills also tended to report higher levels of satisfaction with the practicum experience as a whole, suggesting that skill development might also be linked to a perceived positive experience as a counselor-in-training. This focus on the development of skills across the semester set this element of counselor training apart as one of the primary themes in the early development of these counselors-in-training.



Another related issue that began to appear in the beginning data, but was much more heavily reported in the middle and end sets, was related to critical incidents involving personal emotions. This primarily began when students began regularly seeing clients and addressing client content and issues. These critical incidents began to be reported as soon as trainees began to see clients. Students frequently discussed discomfort with client content perceived as “heavy”, complex, or sad. One student in particular reported unresolved grief leading to strong countertransference in sessions involving complicated issues or death. The resolution of this grief and the student’s mastery of her emotions became a stated primary goal of her practicum experience. This is reflective of what Heppner and Roehlke (1984) wrote about in terms of beginning students’ need to balance their reactions to sometimes intense and emotionally charged client experiences. All students processed personal reactions to client content at various points throughout the semester, as particular clients made impacts on them personally. These students often would first recount what happened during the session, then describe the emotional response they experienced in the moment as well as how they felt after the session had ended. Many students reported processing these experiences with their supervisors as well. Given the consistent existence of reported critical incidents involving the processing of client material and students’ need to learn how to manage emotions in session, the processing of personal responses was also identified as another primary theme in early counselor development.

Throughout the entire semester, supervision was also reported as being extremely influential to counselor development. In fact, supervision was a theme that seemed to thread itself throughout all of the journal entries, at all stages. Reflection responses indicated that supervisors helped students manage their practicum experience, pushed them to develop their skills, helped them process their sessions, and fostered moments of insight. It was noted that

other than one student having difficulty with a site supervisor and another reporting feeling overlooked during group supervision, only positive supervision experiences were conveyed. Some students discussed supervision much more frequently than others. The students relaying their positive experiences in supervision tended to report higher levels of comfort with self, gratefulness for their supervision, and more moments of clarity of purpose. Positive reported critical incidents with supervisors were noted to have more reflective content on a more personal nature. A supervisee who expressed comfort with her supervisor stated that she felt okay to admit not being “perfect”, because she knew her supervisor trusted her to do her best. What is interesting is that Heppner and Roehlke (1984) also found that advanced supervisees who felt comfortable with their supervisors were less focused on the need for support and perfecting their skills and more on processing personally threatening content interfering with their performance in session. This is suggestive that the growth reported by these students as a result of supervision was an indicator that a developmentally appropriate supervisory approach was being employed, as has been recommended by many counseling researchers (Ellis, 1991; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Howard et al., 2006). While it should not be assumed that counselors-in-training who did not report critical incidents in supervision had bad experiences, it is notable that the reported positive supervision relationships were so highly linked to supervisee perceived support and personal insight, particularly at the end of the semester. The existence of supervision throughout all entries made it a clear identified theme when looking at these students’ perceived critical incidents.

The final identified theme only truly emerged in the end data, but was determined to be a primary factor in early counselor development. As students began to reflect on their semester, they almost naturally seemed to begin reporting critical incidents more focused on the integration

of their practicum experiences and their future plans for professional growth. Many students discussed thinking about how far they had come from the beginning to that point, particularly related to their confidence and self-efficacy. While this theme did not clearly manifest itself in the beginning and middle data, it did seem to emerge at the end in a way that suggests that just as practicum inherently pushes counselors to grow in their skills, it also sets the foundation for their professional identity. Students discussed wanting to expand their experiences as well as learn more about certain areas of counseling depending on their circumstances. This impact on professional identity makes sense, as practicum is often the first time students get a real sense of what they are attempting to do as counselors and what the counseling profession is truly like. The strong rise of this theme at the end of the data qualified it for inclusion as a relevant overall theme facing new counselor trainees.

The findings of this study seemed to corroborate other research on critical incidents in counselor training. Overall, participants in this study reported more critical incidents related to anxiety of practicum management at the beginning of the semester, but expressed much less anxiety and perceived professional growth by the end of the semester. The rest of the semester was largely characterized by students focusing on practicing their counseling skills and processing personally meaningful experiences in session and supervision. Supervision was also highly influential, and positive relationships were found to be an integral part of beginning counselor experiences. These results were similar to others looking at critical incidents in counselor development, particularly when confirming the role of supportive supervision (Ellis, 1991; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Heppner & Roehlke, 1984; Howard et al., 2006; Patterson & Levitt, 2011; Woodside, et al., 2007). In addition, the results of this study also reflect Furr and Carroll's (2003) findings on critical incidents that suggested that existential issues and value conflicts,

similar to the personal concerns theme in this case, can have an impact on cognitive and professional development. Furthermore, they found that skill development was also a primary concern of counselor trainees. Finally, these results also correlate well with Stoltenberg's description of Level 1 counselors. Full of insecurity, this stage is characterized by students relying on their supervisors and being highly focused on achieving competency and proficiency in session. Like many of the reflective journal entries in the data pool, students in this stage are also described as being highly self-focused and motivated to learn how to manage emotions (Hale & Stoltenberg, 1988; Stoltenberg, et al., 1998). In all, none of the critical incident themes that emerged in the data were new or previously unexplored topics in early counselor development theory.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study, like many qualitative studies, include the limited number of participants. It is difficult to generalize these reported experiences too broadly given the fact that this sample was taken from a small cohort enrolled in the same program. What we can say is that the themes derived from this data are descriptions of the experiences of this group of participants during the Fall of 2012. The study was also limited due to the nature of the reflective journals. Interviews, for example, might have allowed for the option to have students elaborate or more clearly state the perceived critical incident. While a strength of the journal entries was their anonymity, some entries were clearer than others regarding the perceived critical incident. Interviews would have allowed for the researcher to ask follow-up questions and gain more information in general. Finally, the content of the journal entries might have been impacted due to the nature of it being part of course assignments. While more students treated their entries as true journal entries, some tended to sometimes slip into more formal writing, suggesting they

were writing for the reader as opposed to for themselves. Due to the impact of perceived evaluation, it may be better to make the journaling of critical incidents an optional part of the practicum experience.

### **Implications**

This study sought to clarify the process by which novice counselors develop throughout their first semester of practicum. What emerged was a collection of overall themes in which certain ones manifested more strongly at different points throughout the semester than others. While some themes appeared more frequently in certain parts of the semester, the results of the study did reflect other findings related to counselor development. The reported critical incidents for the participants in this study reported primarily a focus on counseling skill development, the important role of supervision, the need to process personal emotions, concern regarding the management of practicum, and perceived professional development. All themes except the management of the practicum experience have already been identified specifically in the counseling research (Ellis, 1991; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Heppner & Roehlke, 1984; Howard, et al., 2006; Patterson & Levitt, 2011; Stoltenberg, 2005a; Woodside, et al, 2007), particularly when it comes to the role of supportive supervision, (Ellis, 1991; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Heppner & Roehlke, 1984; Howard et al., 2006; Patterson & Levitt, 2011; Woodside, et al, 2007). In addition, research has consistently found that students need to process personal and emotional reactions to client content (Heppner & Roehlke, 1984) and are initially hyper-focused on their skills development (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003). While the classification of management of the practicum experience do not seemingly directly correlate with other studies on counselor development, the impact of negative experiences on student development was also found in Furr

and Carroll's 2003 study. This is suggestive that organized and supportive sites are key to helping ease student concerns.

Given higher levels of anxiety have been reported by novice counselors-in-training as opposed to even moderately more advanced students, the role anxiety plays on student counselor development is especially important at this stage (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992, 2003; Stoltenberg, 2005). The results of this study suggest that supervisors and counselor educators should most keenly focus on assisting the students in managing this anxiety in the first weeks of the semester. In the beginning, students need clear, structured approaches outlining the expectations for practicum in order to help alleviate anxiety. This revolves around issues such as scheduling, paperwork, and orienting to the site, as well as nerves over meeting with clients. In addition, it is important to make sure students feel comfortable discussing their concerns and resolve issues at their sites, as lingering problems regarding unethical behavior and problems receiving direct hours was seen to potentially inhibit student development. As these issues are appropriately addressed, the role anxiety plays on the perceived experiences of the counselor-in-training should diminish and the student can ideally focus on growing in other areas. Strong supervision relationships have generally been seen to be the most influential and effective ways to impart counselor-in-training support, although the findings in this study suggest that an organized site contributes to this perception as well.

As the semester progressed, however, the focus on these concrete needs can shift. The results suggested that students began needing more support developing their skills and processing interpersonal content. In the middle stage, students need class and supervision experiences that allow them to process their use of skills and interventions. It is also important to create a safe space for exploration, as the processing of personal emotions rose as an element in

this process. Here, modeling and their developing theoretical orientation also begin to have a stronger influence on the student's overall development (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2013). This suggests that supervisors and counselor educators in the middle of the first semester of Practicum should remain aware of any lingering student anxiety as this might be a sign of a lack of growth and the student will therefore be less likely to move forward in their development as a counselor.

By the end of the semester, students were still processing client issues, but the content of some journal entries hinted at their strengthening ability to effectively do so on their own without the help of supervision. Here, supervisors may want to focus more teaching the students how to better process these experiences on their own and without the assistance of supervision as most will not have the same level of supervision in internship as throughout practicum. In addition, students were still focused on skill development, but were also considering the future of their professional counseling career. This is reminiscent of what Ronnestad and Skovholt (2013) discussed as a sign of students moving from a novice student phase to a more advanced student phase. These students tend to be more likely to acknowledge the complexity of the counseling relationship and seek to grow professionally as someone who can behave less like a lay person and more like a professional counselor.

Counselor educators and supervisors must be aware of these issues and their impact on counselor development. Novice counselors-in-training need a lot of guidance and support. In order to be most effective, supervisors must provide developmentally appropriate experiences for both creating that supportive environment and pushing counselors towards social-cognitive and moral developmental growth. This requires a nuanced approach that not only involves creating a working alliance with their supervisee, but also paying attention to the expected phases of their student's development throughout the semester. Supervisors should be direct and encourage

students to process whatever personal responses they experience to client content, even recommending they seek personal counseling if needed. Also, supervisors should be able to serve as a resource to help advocate for and assist students in resolving site issues early and directly in order to avoid lingering problems. Counselor educators helping guide students in the practicum process or proctoring group supervision should also be aware of these issues and should attempt to cater their approach in order to best meet student needs. The results of this study suggests that means providing a lot of structure and guidance in the beginning of the semester in order to lessen overall anxiety, but focusing more on the processing of skills development and client experiences as the semester progresses. Finally, it may be helpful to explore professional identity with students towards the end of practicum as they process and integrate their experiences and prepare to move forward to internship. The overall findings of this study correlate well with other research on critical incidents in counselor development. The implications of this study suggest that beginning counselors initially need more support at the beginning of practicum followed by more process-oriented approaches as the semester progresses. This ideally creates a supportive environment conducive to increasing students' social-cognitive and moral development.

### **Recommendations for Research**

The themes that emerged in this study reflect much of what has been found in the counseling literature. By breaking the semester down, however, we now have clearer picture of what the process might be like for counselors-in-training throughout the very beginning of practicum and those first client experiences. Counselors were most focused on skill development, the management of emotions, and keeping their schedules straight. Supervisors were found to play a key role in either facilitating both the growth and management in these areas. Given the



repeated finding that supervision plays such a critical role in student counselor development, it would be interesting to research which supervision experiences are perceived as most important in creating positive supervisory relationships. This could also be critical incident research, only this time the critical incident question could pertain to the supervision experience specifically. As in, which perceived critical incidents in supervision do counselors-in-training report as being impactful to their development as a professional counselor? It would also be interesting to find out more about negative supervision experiences and their impact on growth as well. Also of note is the question as to how this development continues past practicum into internship. Again, counseling developmental theories have addressed these general topics, but few have done specific critical incident research on specific periods of time. Development in internship may look different than when in practicum and therefore require an even different approach in supervision. A longitudinal study following critical incidents throughout the course of a training program would be an interesting way to see how student development manifests from Master's student to professional counselor.

### **Summary**

This study sought to identify perceived critical incidents of counselors-in-training during their first semester of practicum. The themes that emerged from reflective journal entries kept throughout the semester by these students suggested that beginning counselors need a lot of support in the management of the practicum process, particularly in the beginning, are hyper focused on the development of their skills, must learn how to process client issues and manage their emotions, rely on and incorporate supervisor feedback, and finally end the semester

beginning to reflect signs of professional growth. These themes reiterate the importance of a strong, supportive supervisory relationship in the developmental process. Further research will seek to identify more specific supervision strategies in order to look to increase supervisor effectiveness.

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## Appendix A

### COUN 7910 Reflection Journals

Students are asked to keep electronic process journals. These journal entries will be kept in your **Professional Reflection Binder** in dropbox. This folder should only be accessible to your University supervisor. These reflections will be discussed as part of your group supervision process.

Your reflection journals can include your discussion of any issues, concerns or processes related to your development as a counselor. This can include specific topics that may be discussed or presented in your group supervision class. They may also include addressing aspects of the group and individual supervisory process as well as dynamics within and at your practicum site. It is recommended that you consider **critical incidents**:

*Critical incidents are significant learning moments, turning points, or moments of realization ...that you perceive as making a significant impact on your growth as a counselor (Howard, Inman, & Altman, 2006, pg. 8)*

Reflection entries will be graded on a credit basis but will be evaluated related to your level of discussion. Specifically, responses that are vague, overly limited, or repetitive may require some discussion and recommendations to expand upon or revise entries. **You are required to complete a minimum of 10 reflections averaging 1 ½ to 2 pages double spaced.**

Three entries must be completed by **September 25**, three entries must be completed by **October 23**, and three entries must be completed by **November 30<sup>th</sup>**.

**For your final reflection it is asked that you consider these questions:**

1. In what ways did your perspective or ideas about the counseling process change or develop?
2. What did you learn about the counseling relationship?
3. What was one of your greatest challenges and how did you address this challenge?
4. Consider a specific intervention or process in your counseling and how it related to a specific outcome with the client.
5. Consider how you addressed diversity in the counseling process, with a client, and/or in the group counseling process.
6. How has your theoretical orientation or foundation changed or developed during the practicum experience?
7. Discuss what you have learned or how you have developed as a counselor over this practicum experience.
8. What are some goals you have for your continued training during the internship experience?
9. Identify any significant learning or counseling development outcomes from supervision. Discuss any concerns or limitations of your supervision.