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## A Phenomenological Study of Counseling Students' Experiences with Ambiguity

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# A Phenomenological Study of Counseling Students' Experiences with Ambiguity

## **Abstract**

Six master's-level counseling students were interviewed about their phenomenological experiences of ambiguity in counselor preparation. Analysis revealed five themes: students' preparation for ambiguous experiences, ambiguities of counselor preparation, accompanying overwhelming feelings, coping approaches, and self-assurance gained from facing ambiguity. These findings have implications for counselor education and supervision.

## **Keywords**

tolerance for ambiguity, phenomenology, counselor education

Ambiguity is an inherent part of life and counseling (Brams, 1961; Gruberg, 1969; Kottler & Carlson, 2014). For beginning counselors, ambiguity abounds, including learning novel information and skills, working with clients for the first time, navigating multiple sources of influence or information, understanding themselves more fully as individuals and professionals, and generally increasing their awareness of human complexity (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2012). Counselors in preparation also face role ambiguity as they try to negotiate being a student, a supervisee, and a competent beginning counseling professional. The negotiation of the ambiguities inherent in learning to be a counselor is often referenced as having a tolerance for ambiguity (TA), which has been noted as “one of the basic variables in both the emotional and cognitive orientation of a person toward life” (Frenkel-Brunswik, 1949, p. 113). People with high TA view novel, complex, and insoluble (ambiguous) situations as desirable and manageable rather than threatening (Budner, 1962). Given the cognitive and emotional complexities of learning to be a counselor, tolerance for ambiguity is of interest to students, supervisors, and counselor educators.

In counselor preparation, TA can support beginning counselors in many aspects of their therapeutic work. It is theoretically and empirically linked to outcomes that are desirable for counseling students and professionals, such as more effective counseling responses and communication, empathic understanding, respect for clients, and counselor identity development (Brams, 1961; Gruberg, 1969; Jones, 1974; Levitt & Jacques, 2005; Rønnestad and Skovholt, 2012). Counseling scholars have shown interest in TA for decades, but have rarely studied it (Furnham & Marks, 2013). In the few studies considering TA, it has been examined rather unsystematically, focusing on its relationship to a set of disparate personality characteristics and its malleability in short and long-term situations (Furnham & Marks, 2013). This inconsistency in research studies complicates the implications of TA research for counseling student development

and counselor education. A lack of recent attention to TA and confusion in terms of whether and how it may be developed leads to a need to thoroughly examine this concept as a phenomenon so as to better inform counselor preparation.

With the current study, the authors sought to re-invigorate the study of TA in counseling to pursue a deeper understanding of how counselors in preparation experience the ambiguities inherent in their professional development and clinical practice. A phenomenological approach allowed for a rich description of how graduate students described the meaning they made of their experiences with ambiguity as they neared the culmination of their counseling preparation program.

### **Tolerance for Ambiguity and Counseling Skills Development**

Early studies related counselors' tolerance for ambiguity directly to the development of counseling skills. In 1969 in a study of 137 counselors, Gruberg found that counseling students with higher TA used clarification, acceptance, and silence significantly more than did low-TA counselors, and concluded that there is a significant relationship between high TA and the development of effective counseling skills. Similarly, in another study of 27 graduate student counselors, Brams (1961) found an association between counselors' tolerance for ambiguity and expert observations of the helpfulness of their communications with clients. Jones (1974) found with 19 counseling students that TA was significantly correlated with empathic understanding and respect for clients. While these studies are decades old and the sample sizes are small for quantitative methods, these researchers identified a relationship between high tolerance for ambiguity and counseling students' skills and dispositions. These early findings, however, have not been revisited in recent years, and correlations between TA and desirable characteristics for

counselors still leave a gap in counselor educators' understanding of how TA is related to counseling behaviors and skills.

In more recent qualitative research, researchers have identified TA as a characteristic of master therapists (Jennings, Sovereign, Bottorff, Mussell, & Vye, 2005). For example, Jennings et al. (2005) found that ten therapists recommended as masters by their peers reported that they valued and sought out ambiguity in their clinical work and valued openness to complexity, curiosity, and avoiding premature conclusions. Studies related to similar dispositions in counseling students have not been conducted.

Recently, counselor educators have proclaimed the importance of TA in counseling program admissions and professional gatekeeping. Eriksen and McAuliffe (2006) suggested that applicants who are more able to tolerate ambiguity by the end of their program will be more prepared for counseling. McCaughan and Hill (2015) recommended that, though TA may be difficult to assess in counseling program admissions processes, efforts to note evidence of it during interviewing may be worthwhile. In spite of these suggestions, few studies have related TA to counselor competencies or gatekeeping, rendering these ideas a matter of consensus that is not well supported empirically. It remains unclear whether or how TA may develop in counseling students during their program. The present study seeks to provide initial information to guide future research on these topics.

### **Development of Tolerance for Ambiguity**

Given indications of the importance of TA for counseling students and practitioners, counselor educators have speculated about how its development can be facilitated in educational and clinical settings. In a conceptual article, Levitt and Jacques (2005) identified the benefits of increasing counseling students' TA. They noted that counseling students, accustomed to traditional

academic environments, may struggle with the complex and ambiguous process of counselor preparation. To help with developing TA, they suggested that counselor educators encourage students to learn through practice, embrace trial-and-error approaches to acquiring skills, use formative evaluation, process with peers, and use reflective writing. These suggestions are practical and consider cognitive theory and counselor educators' views of student development, yet they lack validation by empirical methods and verification of how such educational strategies are experienced by the students themselves.

Boss (2006) provides more empirical support for the development of TA based on her observations of people's experiences of ambiguous loss. Boss suggests that counselors' acknowledgment of their own ambiguous experiences and exploring tolerance for ambiguity in reflection and group discussions facilitates the development of TA and helps counselors to better work with clients who are experiencing ambiguity. Because Boss' model of TA development is based on clients and not counselors, a gap remains in knowledge of how counselors themselves experience the ambiguity of their clinical work and how they develop tolerance for ambiguity.

Extending this question, some research has investigated ways to increase TA through educational interventions in counselor education. An older qualitative study demonstrated that an ambiguous teaching method led counseling practitioners in a workshop to develop more comfort with ambiguity (Winborn & Martinson, 1965). Winborn and Martinson observed that within a few weeks of refraining from giving direct answers to questions, the counselors became more self-reliant and comfortable with ambiguous processes. Further, in an anecdotal reflection on teaching experiences, Ametrano (2014) observed that ambiguity tolerance was increased through interactive and reflective lessons on ethical decision-making in a counseling ethics course. While one of these studies is dated and one is non-empirical, studies in other disciplines further support that TA can

be altered by manipulating the level of structure provided in an teaching business students (Endres, Camp, & Milner, 2015) and through immersive teaching methods in school psychology (Glover, Romero, Romero, & Petersen, 1978). Conclusions of studies that demonstrate that TA can be taught suggest that some aspect of counselors' response to ambiguity is malleable, and that instructional experiences can facilitate students' growth in it. These findings justify the need for further in-depth research on TA and counselor development.

### **The Current Study**

A review of literature suggests an ongoing need to examine tolerance for ambiguity in counselor education, especially in terms of how TA might be developed. With the exception of a few recent articles, the relevant literature is over 30 years old. Given early evidence that changes in TA may be related to beginning counselors' skills and personal development, there is reason to devote more attention to counseling students' experiences with ambiguity from their own perspective. Of the existing literature, the authors found no studies that considered this, though it will provide a foundation for future research and practice. Given a lack of recent empirical evidence of TA in counseling students, a qualitative inquiry seems a next best step to examine this widely touted and seldom studied phenomenon. The authors chose a phenomenological approach to explore how students related to ambiguity across their educational experience, including how they may have grown in TA. The primary research question was, "How do counseling students make meaning of their experiences with ambiguity?"

### **Methods**

#### **Participants**

With IRB approval, master's-level students from a counselor education program in the southeastern part of the U.S. were recruited from internship courses in mental health, school, and

marriage and family counseling. To participate, students must have had at least one semester of prior clinical experience. Six students, ranging in age from 24-26 years, consented to participate. One participant was male and five were female. All participants identified as white, with one identifying as both white and Latino. Other identities reported by participants included being married, working as a student, and having low-socioeconomic status.

### **Researcher Bias**

As qualitative researchers, the researchers declare their biases in an effort to bracket the impact on the research process and to allow readers to judge their possible influences (van Manen, 1990; 2014; Wertz, 2005). As a student and a faculty member respectively, the researchers' perspectives on the research question were clearly different, but their assumptions were surprisingly similar. Both researchers see a diverse set of reactions to ambiguous situations among counseling students and prefer tolerance and openness to these experiences as a way to develop meaning and grow as a counselor. Both believe that beginning students' desire for certainty might impact their self-efficacy and clinical work. Both felt that persisting through our own ambiguous challenges helped us to develop meaning and grow as counselors. The researchers shared the assumption that having a tolerance for ambiguity is a positive and essential trait for counselors, and that acknowledgement and acceptance of inherent uncertainties is essential in the counseling process. Both researchers also strongly believe that experiences during counselor preparation can instill in students an increased tolerance for the ambiguities inherent in counseling. However, while conducting analysis, the researchers bracketed these assumptions about TA and sought to be as aware as possible of their own biases to best examine and understand the participants' experiences.

In addition to bracketing these biases, one of the researchers who interviewed participants bracketed her position as a student in the same program as the participants. The researcher and

participants had collegial relationships but no personal friendships. The interviewer prepared for interviews through reflection and bracketing her perspective and by discussing the importance of trustworthiness with each participant before the first interview. The researchers used participant checks to verify the interviewer's accurate understanding of each participant's experience and transcript.

### **Data Collection**

Procedures for data collection were based on phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994) and phenomenological interviewing (Seidman, 1991; van Manen, 1990, 2014). Each participant took part in two semi-structured, audio-recorded, 45-minute interviews, which were no more than two weeks apart. Following Seidman's recommendations, the first interview sought background stories about the participants' experiences with ambiguity. Questions focused on participants' motivation for entering the counseling program, their expectations, and specific ambiguous experiences in it. Based on Budner's (1962) types of ambiguities, additional questions concerned students' experiences with ambiguity that were novel, complex, or insoluble situations. Prompts included, "How did you come to be a counseling student?" and "Tell me about a time you have faced a lack of information or experience as a counseling student." In the second interview, participants shared interpretations of their experiences with ambiguity. These prompts were open-ended and included, "Which situations discussed in our first meeting stand out to you most now and why?" and "How do you find you have been impacted by the situations we have discussed?" Transcribed interviews were redacted for confidentiality.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis of the interviews began with a close reading the transcripts, highlighting statements that stood out as meaningful (Seidman, 1991; van Manen, 1990, 2014). Using a

deductive procedure, the researchers then independently coded all the highlighted statements, updating the list with codes that emerged through subsequent readings. The Coding Analysis Toolkit software was used for parts of this process (University of Pittsburg, 2010). Based on descriptions of these themes, final themes were organized based on similarities between the initial codes, removing repetition and overlap, and refining the description of each category (Moustakas, 1994). Lastly, the most prominent statements were verified within and across participants' transcripts were validated to honor individuals' unique experiences, as well as the essence of the shared phenomenon.

### **Trustworthiness**

Concerted efforts were made to support the trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell, 2007). First, the interviewer conducted multiple relatively lengthy interviews (up to 1 ½ hours) with each participant, with time for the participants and researchers to reflect in-between to obtain more authentic and richer data (Seidman, 1991). Member checking confirmed the accuracy of transcripts and findings. With participants, the interviewer clarified the researchers' intention to avoid making assumptions (van Manen, 2014). Field notes, repeated recoding of data, and communication among researchers and with colleagues helped the researchers manage preconceptions in coding the interviews and to confirm trustworthy findings. Themes that were unexpected emerged, supporting the success in bracketing preconceptions and reflecting the trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell, 2007). The authors also used careful auditing of a data trail and thorough analysis, both independently and jointly, to ensure reliability of the themes.

### **Findings**

Results of the thematic analysis yielded five categories that fit the data well. Taken together, the themes describe a series of experiences that was shared across participants. The first

theme was related to *prior personal or professional experiences to prepare for tolerating ambiguity*. Participants shared experiences in their lives leading up to the start of the program that provided them with expectations and readiness for the ambiguities of counselor preparation. The second theme was *recognizing built-in ambiguities in counselor preparation*. Upon starting the program, the students said they experienced a variety of ambiguities that are inherent to taking on graduate work, clinical work, and other roles associated with becoming a professional counselor. The third theme was *feelings of being overwhelmed by ambiguity*. Students discussed a cascade of primarily negative emotions that were heavy and overwhelming as they faced ambiguity. Although some positive feelings were associated with ambiguity, these mixed feelings created an additional layer of ambiguity and ambivalence. The fourth theme was *strategies for coping with ambiguities and associated feelings*. As students reflected on ambiguous experiences in their counseling preparation, they described a number of coping approaches to manage their feelings and unhelpful reactions and to help them be successful or more confident. The final theme was *reconciling ambiguity tolerance through self-assurance*. The participants described coming to a point of change, signified by relief, calm, or self-assurance, and described the process of returning to that mindset during later ambiguous experiences. While the students experienced a renewed self-assurance in unique ways, there was a common thread in how each described feeling more grounded in the face of ambiguity.

### **Prior Personal or Professional Experiences to Prepare for Tolerating Ambiguity**

Participants described a variety of experiences that they felt had prepared them for the ambiguities they faced during counselor preparation. A majority had majored in psychology as undergraduates, which gave them a sense of confidence in expecting ambiguities (P3 and P5). Other participants said helping experiences through informal (e.g., supporting friends) and formal

roles (e.g., crisis center volunteer) prepared them for the ambiguous process of helping relationships and helped them to normalize and tolerate it. Participant six noted, “[I] heard from others that it was a lot about self-exploration, self-growth.” During the admissions process, students heard about the relational culture of the program. Participants four and five said that they knew being in the program felt “personal” (P4) and “right” (P5). For one participant, past counseling experiences prepared them. Participant six had previously been to personal counseling and that helped her to have a sense of what to expect and provided “inspiration.”

Participants noted that ambiguities in their early lives helped them to feel ready for the ambiguities of the counseling program. Three students stated that they were prepared to tolerate ambiguity by family members’ mental illness or family struggles in childhood. Related to this, participant one said, “I think some mental health issues in my childhood with my family members probably sparked some of the interest [in attending a counseling program],” and suggested that these issues at home led to her way of coping with ambiguity internally. Similarly, participant five said he had always viewed ambiguity as a “natural part of life” because of early life uncertainties he experienced.

### **Recognizing Built-In Ambiguities in Counselor Preparation**

During the program, the students recognized a variety of ambiguous experiences that were naturally part of counselor preparation. Participant six stated, “it was said as soon as I got into the program... ‘learn to be comfortable with ambiguity.’ And I wasn’t really sure what that meant.” Participant five further observed, “this isn’t the typical academic program...so there’s some ambiguity in that.” Four of the participants had concerns about the ambiguity of requirements for completing the program successfully, as well as what resources they could access to help them along the way. The participants were also surprised or unsettled by the unstructured nature of

assignments, including the challenge of determining how vulnerable to be with faculty and classmates when assignments prompted more personal sharing than in their prior academic experiences. Participant five noted, “in some of our classes we’re asked to be really vulnerable and we’re asked to share things that we normally wouldn’t” and “the professors probably know a lot about me...but at the same time they’re in a grading role.” Courses most often cited as ambiguous were group counseling, multicultural counseling, ethics in counseling, group supervision, and an elective course focused on the self of the counselor.

Students were particularly nervous about the ambiguity of clinical experiences. Participant four recognized the ambiguity of the helping role itself by suggesting, “maybe my idea of being helpful is totally different than a client’s idea of being helpful.” Participants sometimes felt they were on their own to navigate their ambiguous new role, and without easily accessible help. For most of the participants, it was a struggle to understand their role at their clinical site, which was not clearly defined or changed during their placement. The counselors also predictably faced ambiguity in developing clinical judgment and sorting through information about clients (e.g., input from other clinicians, client notes, police reports, and the client’s disclosures). As participant two noted, “different people have different opinions of the same client.” In these situations, participant three felt “whipped around because I just have to absorb a lot of information and I have to change my whole outlook on [a client].” In addition to all of this, clinical supervision created ambiguity as participants struggled to understand how best to use the various supervision meetings they had throughout the week. About this, participant four said, “Within the supervision relationship, what do you talk about? Navigating whether or not I should be talking about the client or my reaction to the client or my client’s reaction to me [and more]. So all those affect my development as a counselor, but in one hour a week, what do you say?”

In addition, there were relational ambiguities that reached into more personal spheres of the students' lives. Participants one and six worried about how they would make or manage friendships when beginning a new graduate program. Participants four and five highlighted the difficulty of renegotiating personal life relationships while developing their counselor identity. This left participant four "wondering...what my role is now in my family." She found it "isolating and sad" when she lost a friend as she struggled to navigate her newly defined boundaries as a helper. Participant five came to see a balance, saying, "I don't have to completely be this vulnerable mess all of the time or, you know, kind of embrace ambiguity every second of my life."

### **Feelings of Being Overwhelmed by Ambiguity**

Participants experienced an array of emotions ranging from frustration, fear, and despair to curiosity, excitement, and hope in the face of ambiguity. About this, participant five recalled that "everyone was like, 'trust the process, trust the process,' ...but I didn't know what the process was, and that was extremely frustrating to me because I don't think I realized what ambiguity was." Strong feeling words were used to describe the ambiguities of counselor preparation, and included "torture" (P5), "insurmountable," and "drowning" (P4). Participants described feeling anxious, discouraged, frustrated, worried, pressure and heavy responsibility, self-doubt and disgust with their slowness to learn, shame in comparing themselves with others, discomfort, inadequacy, feeling jerked around, preoccupied with how to relate to others and how to grow, feeling burned out, angry, confused, and being "triggered" (P5). Experiences that were mixed with positive emotions included beginning to work with real clients. Participant one stated, "[it's] intimidating to work with...clients but I am excited about it." Participant six shared, "it's like scary and exciting at the same time." Participants recognized how vulnerability and empathizing with clients, although scary, was also valuable and rewarding. According to participant two, "it just helps me

feel more genuine substance for hurt people.” Participant five suggested, “Practicing that vulnerability really allows me to connect to my clients on a deeper level.” Similarly, participant five also felt uncomfortable early on in more ambiguous supervisee-centered supervision, but came to appreciate its value. Participant five identified her ambivalence towards unclear expectations at her internship site; she noted that while it caused frustration and confusion, it also allowed her to have flexibility in her role. As she said, “[the ambiguity] shifted now into kind of like an excitement.”

### **Strategies for Coping with Ambiguities and Associated Feelings**

Participants spoke at length about coping in the face of ambiguities and the cascade of feelings, with several common coping methods. These included seeking supervisors out for questions, advice, support, and help understanding clinical concerns, and accepting the discomfort of unresolved growth processes or problems. Participant five explained, “It’s okay to be somewhere in the middle and working towards...being more functional.” Students also coped through rational and encouraging self-talk; normalizing their experiences; moving forward by accepting the risk of simply doing their best; and deliberately practicing taking a perspective that they wanted to hold on to, such as one that reframed their view to highlight the positive side of ambiguity. Participant six stated, “[I use] mental preparation to remind myself not to get anxious about it and that I’m expected to be okay with it...reframing it that ambiguity is good because it allows me to be more creative.” Other strategies included seeking new learning opportunities, thinking through their options and adapting their plans; talking with peers, mentors, faculty, or supervisors to gain support or information; letting go of what they were unable to control; developing critical thinking and self-awareness; and making note of their accomplishments. Participant one shared, “I think what’s made it easier is having peers that are going through the

same thing.” Participant four was the only one to respond to the ambiguities by seeking personal counseling. When asked how she handled the complexity of issues she described as crowding her supervision time, she mused, “that’s why you go to a counselor!”

### **Reconciling Ambiguity Tolerance through Self-Assurance**

Through coping with ambiguity, the students found that they progressed to a point of acceptance and valuing of ambiguity as well as their responses to it. All participants expressed some form of finding self-assurance or a sense of calm. Participant one related a persistence and confidence in her ability to accept things as they come and to “not to reflect on things too much that I don’t have control over.” Participant two emphasized that his prior perspective on ambiguity that was validated and amplified through his experiences in the program. About ambiguous course experiences he said, “they help me train and confirm my kind of okayness with...the grayness of life,” and “[the program] kind of just let me see more of who I really am.” This perspective “helps me feel at peace, brings an internal calmness” and is “relieving.”

Participant three focused on feeling validated as helping to build self-assurance. When someone else validated her perspective, or when she could validate herself, she felt “happy in the knowledge that I’m gaining.” Along with this, she recognized “it’s difficult to embrace ambiguity.... It’s proof to me that I still have more growth and that there’s so much for me to learn.” Participant four said she found herself “losing pride but then gaining a sense of self-confidence” as she progressed in her relationship with ambiguity. Participant five reflected on overcoming ambiguous challenges as a source of her self-assurance. She stated, “you kind of learn to deal with it...it’s a normal part of life.” She continued, “ambiguity pushed me to...really look at myself and be okay with sitting in the moment.”

Participant six shared a readiness to see ambiguity as helpful and flexible when she said, “I’m not comfortable with ambiguity, but that’s okay” and “I’m trying to accept it more and learn to live with it more, but initially it’s always uncomfortable.” Participant six concluded, “I think as I grow as a professional and become more used to living and working with [ambiguity], become more exposed to it throughout my career, that I’ll adapt as I go on.” Each participant in their own way went through a gradual experience of becoming more aware of and deliberate in their tolerance of ambiguity.

## **Discussion**

The essence of counselor education students’ tolerance for ambiguity encompassed five phenomenological themes. Prior experiences with ambiguous situations or being prepared for the ambiguities inherent in counseling helped them to better tolerate ambiguity. As they confronted ambiguous experiences, the students described an array of emotions that were usually associated with an internal sense of conflict that could be quite intense. Though students related a range of emotions from relative comfort or unease to high levels of discomfort with ambiguity, they generally moved towards acceptance and appreciation of ambiguity as a desirable state, which also brought with it some self-assurance and calmness. As they did so, students said they grew in self-trust that contrasted with their earlier self-doubt. As students engaged with ambiguity more deliberately over time, self-understanding was a meaningful way to deal with the uncertainties they faced. Awareness that they would continue to face ambiguity in the future made way for increased hope that they would benefit from their tolerance for ambiguous situations.

Findings of the current study support counselor development literature that suggests that beginning counselors struggle with ambiguity as inherent to essential developmental tasks. Skovholt and Rønnestad (2003) described stressors for beginning counseling students that are

consistent with the present findings, such as navigating emotional boundaries, working through fragile self-concept, etc. However, the present findings suggest that not only must beginning counselors weather the stresses of such ambiguities in their development, but meaningful growth may also include developing appreciation for and actively engaging in the processes of accepting and coping with these ambiguities. The students interviewed for this study discussed a strong recognition of tolerance for ambiguity as a positive attribute for counselors, which is reflective of prior studies that found tolerance for ambiguity supports counselors' resiliency and mastery (Jennings et al, 2005; Kottler & Carlson, 2014; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2012). As the counseling students gained comfort with ambiguity, they came to associate tolerance of it as part of their ongoing growth process.

Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) presented a model of counselor development comprising of six stages and related tasks through which tolerance for ambiguity develops. The present findings illustrate that relationships between developmental tasks and tolerance for ambiguity may be dynamic and less linear than a stage model suggests. Given that this study was conducted with students, the participants' relatively advanced ideas about tolerance for ambiguity is of interest. The themes found in the present study seem to suggest *how* Rønnestad and Skovholt's experienced professionals may have grown to embrace ambiguity. The findings suggest that novice counselors may begin to actively embrace the ambiguities in their work and to see this task as an opportunity for growth. In the current study, novice counselors' perspectives of TA are also surprisingly consistent with how Jennings et al. (2005) describe master therapists. Findings of the current study also seem to support conclusions drawn by Eriksen and McAuliffe (2006) who stated that TA is a skill that can be developed during counselor preparation, given the right conditions.

Results of the present study also echo Boss' (2006) findings concerning the importance of counselors' tolerance for ambiguity. Boss emphasized the importance of counselors finding meaning in ambiguity, tempering their desire for mastery and certainty, normalizing ambivalent feelings, altering their identity to embrace it in their personal and professional life, fostering it in relationships, and developing a sense of hope in the face of it. This study reinforces the importance of these tasks in counselor development. Students struggle with and gain from the ambiguity embedded within counselor education, and these are among the first situations that provide impetus for these critical developmental tasks. The present results suggest that not only are Boss' tasks appropriate in response to ambiguity, but also that the process of students working through ambiguities creates an amplified feedback loop of ambiguity that may be overwhelming at times, but that students can learn to persist through and even embrace positively.

### **Implications for Counselor Educators**

Implications for the study's findings for counselor educators and supervisors include ways to help students to reflect on their experiences, manage undue distress, and support their increasing independence. Exploring and reflecting on their prior life experiences with TA as lay helpers and in ambiguous life events may give students a sense of their present relationships with ambiguity. Educators can also encourage students to reflect on their ongoing ambiguous experiences, giving them space to consider their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral tendencies for coping with ambiguity, and encouraging them to reflect on how this changes across counselor preparation.

Hearing about and normalizing the intensity of emotions that are associated with ambiguity may foster tolerance for ambiguity. Moreover, inviting students to take note of their growing self-assurance and validating the process of gaining this self-assurance is important. Counselor educators can validate students by noting that this developmental process will feel different for

each student, and may not always feel like steady progress because of its non-linear nature and the mixed feelings that accompany it. Normalizing the personal nature of the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral process of developing TA may help students manage the discomfort they experience from not knowing what is expected and seeing peers process the experience differently. Sharing and normalizing students' experiences may support them in developing meaning from ambiguity and a more positive, self-assuredness. While ambiguity tolerance is considered essential for counselor development and ambiguity is inherently a part of the educational process, empathic listening from faculty and the intentional structuring of ambiguous program experiences to provide appropriate levels of emotional support can help, whether these activities are related to educational, clinical, or administrative functions.

Faculty can be explicit in the ways in which they are prepared to support students in their development of TA. It may be helpful to invite conversations about ambiguities students are facing in the classroom to reach students who may hesitate to seek help one-on-one, particularly those who believe they must manage ambiguity alone. Counselor educators might consider that the intensity of mixed emotions that students face in managing ambiguities are further complicated by a power differential between students and supervisors that can impact students' willingness to seek support and initiate meaningful conversations about their struggles (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). In these conversations, instead of trying to resolve ambiguity with advice, counselor educators can provide both support and challenge to help students cope positively with inherent ambiguities in counselor preparation while also working to manage any unnecessary program-based problems. As with other aspects of counselor development, the strength of the relationship between the educator and student is the best foundation for applying all of these recommendations (Rønnestad and Skovholt, 2003).

There are specific ways in which counselor education programs can build in educational experiences for students to explore ambiguity. Supervision experiences and other coursework with a focus on counselor development can focus on students' holistic development, including facing the ambiguities inherent in counseling practice. In the authors' program, a course titled, "Counselor as a Person" explores counseling students' vulnerability as it relates to other people in their lives, including clients. Participants in the present study appreciated the opportunity to explore personal aspects of the ambiguity of becoming a counselor provided in this course. Clinician-centered supervision, group supervision courses, and other similar opportunities can also provide such a forum for exploration of ambiguity.

Consistent with prior theory, the finding that counseling students appear to make gains in TA through reflecting on their ambiguous experiences leads to the recommendation that counselor educators should not seek to eliminate or seriously diminish this exposure (Boss, 2006). Instead, what is important may be supporting students early on in exploring the personal meanings of the popular wisdom of "trusting the process," self-trust, and acceptance of the ambiguities in counseling. When students engage with ambiguity and the myriad emotions that it provokes, they gain a genuine appreciation for the role it will continue to play in their own and their clients' lives.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This study is limited in some ways that may direct future research. First, though multiple interviews were conducted for this study, data sources were limited to interviews. Future studies might include in-depth interviews as well as multiple other data sources. More in-depth member-checking and participant interpretations of profiles may provide a richer perspective of students' experiences.

Other considerations include the participants' rather narrow age range, and all were from a single southeastern university setting. Also, diversity by race, ethnicity, and culture were limited. In qualitative research, a small and homogenous sample such as this allows for depth of understanding of a phenomenon, rather than breadth or generalizability. Such a sample is not considered a limitation, but should be taken into account when interpreting the study findings (van Manen, 2014). Future studies are needed to see whether these findings fit students' experiences across other counseling programs and diverse identities. It would be useful to examine TA in a larger, more generalizable sample of counseling students. Researchers might also examine the relationship of specific teaching and supervision interventions to the development of TA.

Though students shared their perceptions that TA was increasingly viewed as a necessary way for them to grow as a person and as a counselor, the mechanisms of how they achieved this change were not the focus of this study and remain unexamined. Future studies should evaluate the effectiveness of specific educational interventions for TA during counselor preparation. Studies that are situated in counseling core and clinical coursework in which ambiguity is most likely, such as ethics, group counseling, and practicum and internship, are most recommended.

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