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Learning to be a Counselor at a Distance: A Qualitative Investigation of the Distance Education Experience for Counselors-in-Training

Abstract
Counselor education has evolved to include distance education. There is, however, a dearth of research aimed *specifically* at distance education for counselors-in-training. This research looks to redress this by analyzing data gathered during interviews of six counselors-in-training. The results revealed that online counseling students were predominately satisfied with their education experience despite some concerns. Themes relating to convenience, separateness, connectedness, self-efficacy, and stigma were identified. As distance education continues to progress, it will be imperative that counselor educators create programs that meet the needs of students but also allow for proper training and protection of clients and the public.

Keywords
distance education, counselor training, Internet, qualitative research, counselors-in-training

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Counseling is an intensely interpersonal activity and counselor educators are ethically obligated to properly prepare and vet students (American Counseling Association, 2014). The manner in which students are prepared for the profession has evolved over the decades. A significant and contemporary change has been in the use of the Internet to deliver course content to students. Distance education, for all disciplines, has been expanding (U.S. Department of Education, 2015) and many counselor education programs have worked to develop online curricula that meet the needs of students, educators, supervisors, the public, and accrediting bodies. There are currently 92 different schools offering master's degrees in counseling (SR Education Group, 2017) and the largest accrediting organization for counselor educational programs (i.e., the Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs) has approved 39 different online counseling programs, provided through 21 different institutions. For some, the notion of teaching about such a highly intimate profession to students that do not share the same physical space as the instructors seems somewhat anathema and may even have an impact on hiring practices (Carnevale, 2007; Mandelbaum, 2014). Regardless, distance education – including counselor education – continues to grow (Allen & Seaman, 2014, U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

There has not, however, been much research aimed specifically at distance education for counselors-in-training. Some reports, such as Blackmore, van Deurzen, and Tantam (2008) have concluded that counselors-in-training seem to be satisfied with distance education, but those findings are based upon reported attendance and completion rates. Others, such Leykin, Cucciare, and Weingardt (2011), concluded that online, post-graduation training significantly bolstered substance abuse counselors' sense of personal accomplishment, while also reducing reports of emotional exhaustion. More recently, Scholl, Hayden, and Clarke (2017) reported that

online counselors-in-training believe that consistent, high-quality communications from instructors may lead to enhanced student engagement.

The purpose of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of the experience of being trained to be a counselor – a career that is intrinsically defined by interpersonal closeness (American Counseling Association, 2014) – but completing the training at a distance. This topic has not yet been formally examined. For previously unexamined experiences, qualitative methods are often recommended as a meaningful point of departure because they attempt to capture the processes and socially constructed realities of the participants, rather than to measure and uncover causal connections (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The task of giving meaning to experiences has clear ties to existential philosophy, but rather than writing about distant metaphysical concepts, phenomenology requires its writers to be in close contact with the subject being examined and following a reductionist processes (i.e., the distillation of the essence from extraneous material) that incorporates hermeneutic translations of that which is studied (i.e., interpretation of experience into meaningful language; Lichtman, 2006). By deeply understanding the experience through phenomenological research methods, future inquires can be better informed in their development and launch.

Distance Education

Despite seeming like a modern phenomenon, distance education has been offered for centuries. One of the first known forms of distance education began with prospective clergymen obtaining their training through postal correspondence in the early 1700s (Albrektson, 1995). This evolved throughout the centuries with the University of London in the mid-1800s becoming one of the first institutions of higher education to offer degrees to students far afield (International Museum of Distance Education, 2015). As new technologies emerged, distance

education continued to evolve to embrace it. Introduced in the late 1950s, the Pennsylvania State University became the first institution to create and use closed-circuit television classrooms (Bobren & Siegel, 1960). The electronic delivery of course content continued to promulgate with the emergence of home computing in the 1970s and then morphing into formalized online classroom platforms (e.g., WebCT) in the 1990s. Further advances in mobile computing in the early 2000s created an intensified demand for distance education opportunities (Baepler, 2010). With this increased demand and a wider array of technological tools, distance education has also sprouted into a variety of forms, under a multitude of names (e.g., e-learning, web-based training, virtual classrooms). Still further, The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) launched an unprecedented plan to open all of its courses to anyone that could access their online *MIT OpenCourseWare* modules, which created classrooms comprised of many thousands of online learners (Liu, Chen, & Zhu, 2009).

In an effort to define current distance education, The U.S. Department of Education (2010) highlights that the Internet typically plays a central feature. By using the Internet, there can be a full or partial excision of the in-person, face-to-face, student-to-instructor interaction. Instead, some or all of the interactions are replaced with asynchronous messaging (e.g., discussion boards, emails); fully live, interactive video conferences; or some combination of the aforesaid. Additionally, courses may be fully online or some combinations of online and in-person courses – often referred to as hybrid or blended courses. Toward further categorization the models, Allen and Seaman (2014) suggest that hybrid courses are courses in which 30-79% of content is delivered online, whereas online courses provide greater than 80% of content from a distance.

Within higher education, the current question being raised is no longer about whether or not these technological advances should be included in learning, but rather how to best use them while still meeting educational objectives of all students (American Association of School Administrators, 2016). The U.S. Department of Education (2014) reported that online learning continues to grow, with 27% of all college students (5.5 million) taking at least one online class and the Pew Research Center (Taylor, Parker, Lenhart, & Patten, 2011) found that 77% of all 4-year colleges offer some online classes. Furthermore, 69% of academic leaders reported that online learning is critical to their long-term plans, despite their reports that only about 30% of those leaders believe that their faculty members value online learning (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

Distance education's continued spread has led researchers and educators toward efforts to better understand what factors foster increased student satisfaction. There is evidence to suggest that high-quality, content-focused course design may enhance learner satisfaction (Li, Marsh, & Rienties, 2016), while activities such as group projects (Lee, Ngampornchai, Trail-Constant, Abril, & Srinivasan, 2016) and required online discussions (Cho & Tobias, 2016) do not seem to affect satisfaction levels. The onward progression of distance education becomes complicated by the growing expectation that it will be available to students, yet only 29% of the public reportedly believes that it is a wise option (Taylor et al., 2011) and 56% of potential employers sampled by Public Agenda (2013) would prefer hiring graduates from traditional, face-to-face programs. The public's overall perceptions of distance education may be further complicated by the increasing visibility of online options (Deming, Goldin, & Katz, 2012) and recent reports of predatory practices by some private, for-profit institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

As the number of distance education programs continue to grow, there is a need for an improved understanding of it and its effects. For graduate-level training programs that focus on

interpersonal skills, there is an obligation to understand how to best provide such training. An examination of the professional literature reveals sparse details about how counselors-in-training perceive the experience. This research effort aims to answer the question: What is the distillate of the online educational experience from the perspectives of counselors-in-training?

Method

Recruitment and Participants

The target sample size for the study was 5-10 people. Creswell (2006) recommends using up to 10 people for a phenomenological approach while Denzin and Lincoln (2000) suggest "approximately six participants" (p. 225) for such studies. Recruitment announcements were distributed on the CESnet listserv (a community of over 1300 counselor educators, supervisors, counselors, and a small percentage of counselors-in-training [Jencius, 2013]) and on ACA-Connect (an online discussion board hosted by the American Counseling Association). The announcements asked potential participants to contact the principle investigator, via email or phone. Once contact was made, individuals were screened for inclusion in the project and basic contact information was gathered. The inclusion criteria were that participants must be 18 years or older and completed (or near completion) of an online counseling education program. Twelve people responded to the recruitment announcements. Two individuals were excluded from the project for being too new to the online learning experience and four individuals did not respond after their initial contact with the principle investigator.

Six individuals were interviewed for the study. Two of the interviewees lived in the Midwestern region of the United States, two in Southern states, and two in the Northeast region. Gender was equally split (three women, three men) and their mean age was 41.8 (range = 34–54). Five individuals identified as White and one person as African American. Three were

master's-level students (who had completed all core coursework, but were on internship), two had earned their master's degrees (one working as a licensed professional counselor and one working in an unrelated profession), and one was a student nearing completion of an online PhD program.

For those interviewed, written consent was obtained (via mail) and, because all participants were at great distances, the interviews took place using Internet video conferencing applications and were recorded using suitable software. The principle investigator conducted all of the interviews. The interviews lasted 45 – 60 minutes and were structured around 12 open-ended question. The questions were designed to elicit details regarding the individuals' experiences with online learning and extemporaneous follow-up questions were asked to solicit additional details.

Data Analysis

The analysis was completed by the principle investigator with assistance from members of the research team (comprised of another university faculty member and several trained, graduate-level research assistants). The analysis followed the procedures for phenomenological inquires outlined by Creswell (2006). This method calls for a systematic distillation of meaning, starting with the verbatim transcription of the interviews. Once transcribed, team members began reading and rereading the interviews in an effort to identify significant statements. Through consensus building, a compilation of significant statements was created and, from that, emerging themes were identified and agreed upon by team members. After which, the significant statements were sorted and coded along those themes. All data were then reduced down to a succinct portrait of the experience. According to Creswell (2006), the purpose of such efforts is to capture the coalesced experience of the studied phenomenon.

Rigor, Standards, and Verification

Quantitative research uses validity and reliability as markers that gauge worthiness (Rice & Ezzy, 1999). Qualitative research, however, does not typically rely on these terms. Instead, Rice and Ezzy argue that the concept of rigor can appropriately capture the issues addressed within quantitative research's measures of validity and reliability. Rigor, according to Rice and Ezzy, indicates how well the information yielded represents the observed reality of the subject. Creswell (2006), however, asks "How do we know that the qualitative study is believable, accurate, and 'right'?" (p. 193). He recommends a thorough process of verification, in which he identified eight commonly employed exploratory procedures that increase the trustworthiness of qualitative investigations. His compilation includes practices such as prolonged engagement, negative case analysis, and external audits. Creswell (2006) recommends that researchers enact at least two different methods.

For this study, four efforts to address rigor and verification were employed: (a) clarifying researcher bias, (b) participant reviews, (c) rich descriptions, and (d) peer review. Prior to starting the project, the research team engaged in individual, self-reflexive bracketing (Kocet & Herlihy, 2014) in an effort to identify and understand any preconceived notions. The research team held several open discussions about potential personal biases. All team members were actively invested in in-person, face-to-face education, so any overt or covert biases needed to be eliminated or minimized. Team members were encouraged to enter a non-judging, objective epoché state (Moustakas, 1994) while reviewing the transcripts. Throughout the process, team members were engaged in on-going conversations regarding the importance of setting aside any contaminating personal perspectives. Toward accuracy, the transcripts were mailed to the interviewees for participant reviews. There were no reported discrepancies or recommended

edits from the participants. Maintaining participants' wording and phrasing throughout the analysis aided in the development of a full, rich description of the experience. Additionally, peer review of the data and the process with the team members helped to ensure that significant statements and themes emerged organically from the data. These reviews examined whether the interpretations of the data accurately matched the words and intentions of the participants.

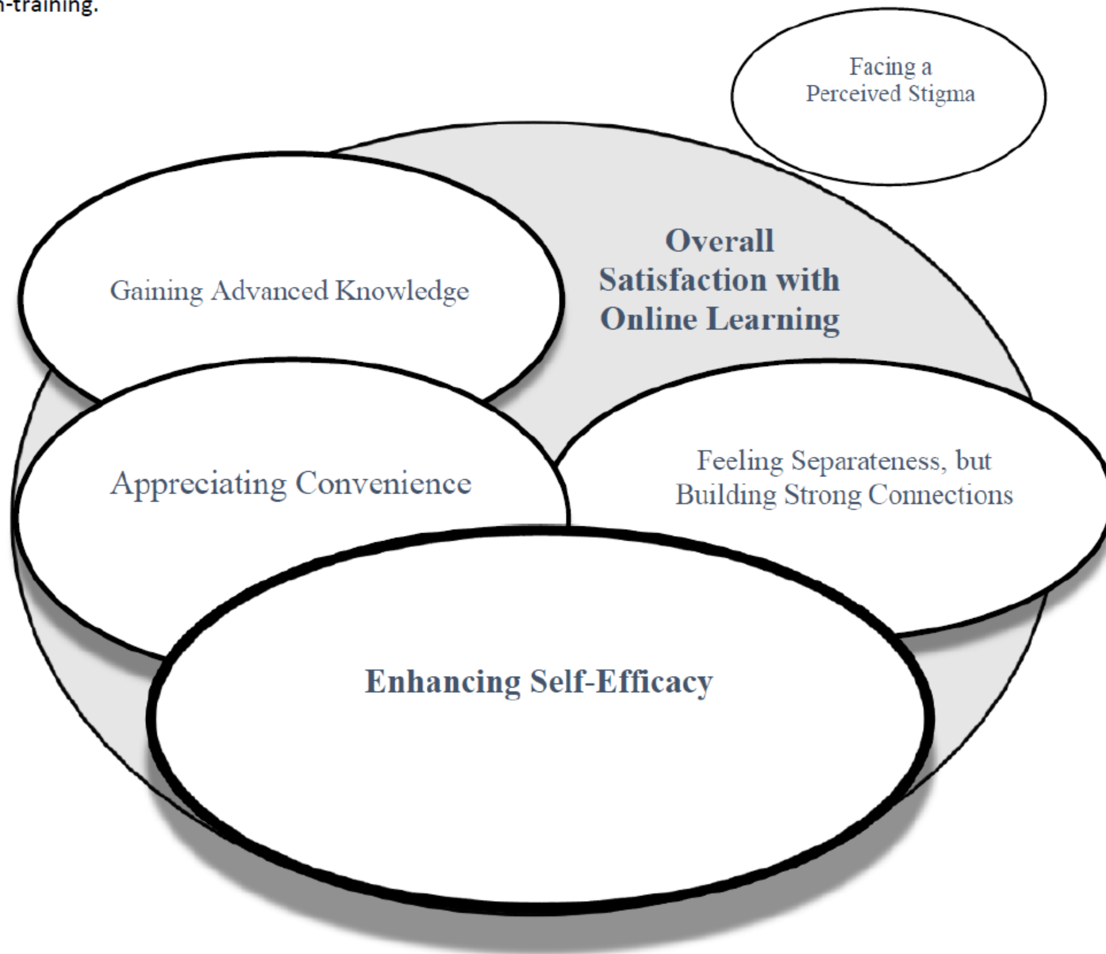
Results

The overarching, ascribed theme of the interviews was satisfaction. Not all of the participants were fully satisfied with every aspect of their online learning experience, but all reported believing that they gained a better understanding of counseling or benefited by developing professional skills that they otherwise would have not. Each participant highlighted that the convenience of online coursework was integral to their enrolling in a master's degree program. Furthermore, interviewees noted the online learning experience was isolating and they sensed the model is sometimes viewed by others as somewhat "*lesser than*," yet all participants were able to easily subjugate such feeling. From their statements, five distinct themes emerged that describe their experiences of online learning. These themes were: Appreciating convenience; Feeling separateness, but building strong connections; Gaining advanced knowledge; Enhancing self-efficacy, and Facing a perceived stigma (see Figure 1).

Appreciating Convenience

All of the participants reported an appreciation that their enrollment in online learning created minimal disruptions to their lives. Several people suggested that they would not have sought out a master's degree if it interfered with their work schedules, created significant strain upon family relationships, or required relocation. One participant explained that she chose her online program "simply because there was nothing in proximity that [she] could do and have it

Figure 1. A visual depiction of emergent themes that describe the experience of distance education for counselors-in-training.



work within [her] schedule -- still be able to carry on a full time job." Another person echoed that sentiment, adding:

> I didn't want to move a significant distance away…I had done a lot of surfing online …and I found that [a particular school] had a Counselor Education and Supervision program which is really what I wanted to do… and I didn't see any, like, glaringly bad reviews, so I thought I'd give it a try for a quarter semester.

Family considerations were also central to several individuals' decision making process. One woman reported that after considering a few different in-person programs, she found the online model fit with her family needs. She stated:

> When I started, my daughter was…in kindergarten. She was getting out a little before 12 o'clock and it just didn't make any sense for me to try to get to classes with her being home so early. So it was just easier to do it online.

Other, more parochial matters, such as having "only one car" between adult partners, also affected participants' choices. An interviewee explained that, "It would have been extremely difficult for me to get to a campus… [an online program is] just easier for me to work around." The ability to set one's own hours, however, was consistent throughout all interviews. This notion was repeated in statements such as:

> It was nice – I could do it anytime I wanted to. I've got a family, um, so I was able to work full time and put my son – spend a little time with my son – and then in the evening, I would do most my studying. So the flexibility was definitely a benefit.

This satisfaction with being able to do classwork at convenient times was further enhanced by the sense that instructors (and other students) were readily available by email, texting, or telephone consult. One participant explained that, with her electronic messaging, "I always got an answer…they always got back to me within 24 hours…and most of the instructors were pretty great that way."

Feeling Separateness, but Building Strong Connections

All the participants mentioned the solitary nature of online learning. One person stated that her online program "could be a *really* lonely place to learn," while another explained that online learning "can be very isolating…You can feel like you're the only one in the world who's got this problem with this course." Still, another interviewee pined for the lost physical presence of others. She explained that: "The thing I miss the most is just having that, that in-class experience…just having the experience of other class members *there* and actually *a live person*

standing in front." Another person suggested that, with lengthy episodes in front of a computer, "you definitely get, like, cabin fever." Such feelings of separateness were noted by all participants, but these experiences were overwhelmingly offset by a sense of still being connected to others due to the aforesaid ease of communicating with instructors and classmates via the Internet or telephone. One participant explained that engaging in bulletin board discussions can grow into more substantial relationships, if efforts are made. She explained:

> I just went out of my way to help people and it was a way of helping me too. And I was able to develop relationships, some only lasted for that particular class. Some of them lasted a little bit longer than that – one of my friends – I talk to three, four times a day through email. Sometimes we talk to each other on the phone. I have another friend from [another area of the U.S.] who's [graduated and] a counselor now – I talk to him too, a lot.

Other interviewees echoed the sentiment that technology made connecting with classmates easy. Additionally, others noted that the in-person components of their programs (e.g., the counseling skills classes, the group counseling experiential component) quickened the process of bonding and amplified its need. It was posited that, "I think from being -- from going from a *secluded environment* into a *classroom environment* you make friends more readily … you really start to understand the value of that connection." One person explained:

> Some of the classmates you contact online, you communicate online, and you find out background information about people and what people like, what people do – things like that. Then, going to the [residential components] you meet some people face-to-face, and it brings a different level of, um, communication – different level of, uh, relationship. And, then you get to experience people as friends … It becomes a more intimate

> relationship … We did things together as a group …went out and studied together, ate together, lunch, dinner, um, stayed in communication afterwards … and check in with each other – it was very good.

Retreating to some separateness, however, was also greatly valued. Some interviewees expressed an element of appreciation for the freedoms that segregation brought – especially for adults who are not interested in "the college experience… the dorm experience and all that other stuff." A participant explained, "I wouldn't have the time to stay on campus to do that socializing – it's been better for me to stay in contact with fellow students [via email]…You're not dragged to the bar and not being able to say no."

Gaining Advanced Knowledge

All the interviewees believed that their understanding of counseling and the profession had been enhanced by online learning. A participant elaborated:

> I've just been introduced to, you know, some new concepts within the field. And I, you know, I know just a lot more about lots of things that I had no idea existed before… Having all of these different classes and counseling theory, counseling process, and then the medical research methodology – I think it's really made me a rounded professional… And I think it's been a huge growth… I've just kind of become more rounded and skilled in different areas and I hope that professionally that will work well for me.

There were many comparisons to in-person programs, with five of the six interviewees thinking that their programs maintained rigorous academic standards that were equal to, or better than traditional programs. "You have to work hard. You're still doing papers. You're still doing research – and you're still held accountable for everything" was how one person described the experience. Online classes were also described as places where students could not "hide"

from discussions. This, it was said, aided in learning. Another participant stressed that, “online and land-based counselor ed programs should be considered almost peers in some respects, because the curriculum is almost identical.” This person went on to explain that both types of learning can be of high-quality, “but it boils down to the faculty;” suggesting that high-quality faculty will create academically stringent courses, regardless of method of delivery. Several statements indicated that many of the online instructors met these high standards. One participant appreciated the “constant feedback” and reported that it was better than the traditional model of feedback. She explained that, “we’d get feedback – every assignment we did, for every week – we’d get feedback on it – constant, continuously – and it was always positive, always motivating, to, uh, keep up the good work, don’t give up.”

One interviewee, however, thought that the online learning environment lacked academic integrity. Her assessment included comparisons to her experiences with an online bachelor’s program in which viewing recorded lectures was mandatory and exams were overseen by paid proctors. Her master’s program, she said, included some open-book exams and no one was overseeing the testing process – leading her to question “the honor system.” She elaborated by stating:

> I'm the type of person that if I can find a shortcut to do something, I — I'm gonna do it and I could find a whole lot of shortcuts. I got a lot of books in my classes, I'll admit, I did not read them, because I didn't have to read them in order to know the material in the class, and it got to be a little disappointing for me… because, uh, I don't have to learn as much in order to get an A in this class. I graduated with a 3.8, so – *and to not have read the books and get a 3.8*, to me I'm – I started questioning, ‘Is something wrong with this system if you can do that?’

She did, however, conclude that she gained a lot of knowledge from the experience. This was based upon her ability to pass the *National Counselor Examination for Licensure and Certification* on her first attempt and from the feedback that she has received from supervisors, peers, and clients. Moreover, her stated concerns were offset by the other five interviewees who painted their programs as "solid," "excellent," or that they were "very impressed with, um, with the content, the support, the delivery – and I feel as if I have learned a *tremendous* lot."

Enhancing Self-Efficacy

The strongest theme that emerged was that online learning helped participants in developing and refining skills related to self-disciple, motivation, self-advocacy, and professionalism. Participants unequivocally reported feeling as if their self-efficacy was positively affected by the experience. A participant explained that distance education "puts more responsibility on me as the learner -- to make sure that I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing, when I'm doing it." Others reiterated this same notion "that being online helped me to really develop that self–discipline needed and that self–motivation, um, to not give up and to, and to do what I need to do when I need to do it."

Having to manage their employment obligations, personal lives, and academic activities reportedly spurred participants to develop or refine skills. One person explained that:

> It's taught me to be in the office before a lot of people -- I [also] stay a little bit later… at the same time, I can *compartmentalize*…I know I want to spend some time with my family – so I block out that time – '*This is family time*' -- and then I'll, uh, go do my '*work time*' a little bit later on…I think that that aspect is maybe one of the unexpected benefits.

Several individuals noted that having to complete classwork at distance helped them to gain courage in speaking-up for themselves. One participant stated that:

> It's definitely helped me to advocate for myself… [when encountering problems] I got on the phone and talked to some professors a couple times – that were in charge of the programs, to ask questions…you know, it's providing me the independence, the confidence… that, umm – I think, you know, maybe I wouldn't have developed.

Additionally, interviewees reported that their counseling skills have developed, along with other professional skills, such as writing, consulting, and using technology. One person noted, "I'm able to communicate better – and I have a stronger professional orientation." The online learning experience was also described as having a much broader effect – affecting one's personhood. This was described by one interviewee as:

> I think it's helped me to grow…you know, as *a person* and as *a professional,* too. I'm… seeing the world differently. Taking classes again, has kind of given – opened up myself more to wanting to learn on my own and asking questions and getting excited about what I'm learning about and, umm, just trying to develop the skills that I need, to get to the next point in my life, you know, to become a counselor.

Facing a Perceived Stigma

Participants reported feeling as if online programs were judged by other people differently than traditional, face-to-face programs. One of the six participants reported receiving explicit, negative reactions from others about online learning. She stated, "I've had comments from people within the field who've said to me – it's equated with, you know, the diploma mill or could be – it's quality – it's easier." The remaining interviewees, however, had not been confronted by overt negative biases. One person explained that "no one really said anything

really directly to me." Instead, participants reported *sensing* that there was a stigma associated with online learning, or being concerned that others would view their education as inadequate. In explaining this, one person stated:

> I think there's – I – I do believe there's definitely a stigma attached to distance learning… And so, I can see that that's a problem. But I've found some of those people just aren't familiar with the changes in technology… So maybe it's just misinformation and – and then what people have been familiar with.

Another participant reiterated the notion that the public may be unacquainted with distance education. She stated that, after others became aware that she was engaged in distance learning, "people were just really curious in general and wanted to – asked a lot of questions about an online experience." Her experiences, she said, have fostered some worries related to others "wondering if [she] really had a good education." Concerns about others' perceptions have affected one interviewee's interpersonal responses. He explained that "maybe [I'm] a little bit more guarded, when talking about my master's degree. Umm, because a lot of people will think, 'Well, you got it online -- that was easy.'" This reported trivialization of the online learning experience evoked and even stronger reactions from one participants. She stressed:

> I *do* get angry. Because I think about how much work I've done over the past 2 years and, you know, I – I pretty much worked 7 days a week for 2 years and – and – and putting in a lot of hours into my study. And, so yeah – I *do* get angry! And I do get *annoyed*! And, I don't know what it takes to convince people. And then I think, 'Why try to convince people?' So – and I – I don't [try to convince them].

The same participant went on to assert, "I don't care what anybody says. I *worked* for that degree!" This attitude, she explained, is bolstered by her work with her clients and their

reaction to her online training. She said that, when she started working as a counselor, she expected disdain or distrust from clients. Instead, clients have responded with an attitude of [nonchalantly] "Yeah, okay, that's fine."

Limitations

A conspicuous limitation of research results from a single qualitative study relates to generalizability. The purpose of such studies is to capture and understand participants' experiences (as best possible) in a deeply personal, yet scientific manner. The experiences of the individuals in this study may not represent the experiences of other individuals who have engaged in counselor education activities at a distance. Generalizability, however, may be constructed from a collection of many, similar qualitative studies (Creswell, 2006). This study's findings are not intended to define the distant education experience for *all* counselors-in-training, but the themes that emerged from the interviews aid in the understanding of what it may be like to learn how to be a counselor through distance education.

Furthermore, not all of the comments made during the interviews coalesced to the greater themes that emerged. Some of the noted thoughts or feelings were simply not expressed by multiple participants. As an example, one participant expressed his sincere appreciation that instructors – being widely dispersed across the country – were able to provide a broad array of perspectives on the counseling profession. This diffuseness, however, created difficulties for that interviewee to connect with other professionals *in his local community*. The failure for these ideas to precisely fit within an identified theme does not invalidate the significance of his experience, yet such singular ideas did not define the overall, captured phenomenon. As such, they were omitted from the narrative.

Additionally, the ideas that were expressed by the participants cannot be viewed as objective, biased-free statements. Regardless of the tenor (positive, negative, or neutral), the participants have invested their time, efforts, and (assumedly) money into distance education. Relying on stakeholders, however, does not undermine the qualitative process, nor does it negate what they think or feel. Per contra, their personalized, subjective experiences are critical in understanding what occurs for students at a distance.

Discussion and Recommendations for Future Research

Although it is widely understood that singular qualitative excursions cannot be generalized, the intimate details discovered can prove to be invaluable when considered in light of other similarly focused studies. Because little has been reported about the experiences of students learning to be counselors at a distance, looking to the research findings from adjacent fields may serve to corroborate or refute the themes identified within this study. As examples, Fincham's (2017) phenomenological inquiry of five students who earned master's degrees in a catholic school leadership program and Albert's (2015) study of two students in a master's of music education program reported similarly satisfactory experiences. Both studies revealed that students chose their distance education program for the flexibility in scheduling and that they did not believe that being a distance learner impeded the overall quality of education. Additionally, Fincham's report stressed the need for learners to possess a great deal of self-discipline and self-motivation, and that the knowledge they gained from online learning provided a solid foundation for professional pursuits.

Alternatively, some of the counselors-in-training's less favorable accounts were also captured in Rogerson-Revell's (2015) study of students in a master's of arts education program and in Michael and Miller's (2012) study of students in a master's of agricultural program.

Rogerson-Revell identified feelings of isolation as a concern while Michael and Miller highlighted the difficulties that online adult learners face when trying to manage many aspects of life (e.g., school, work, families, recreation). Both of these ideas were minor concerns expressed by some of the counselors-in-training in this study.

To alleviating such concerns, distance learning models must do more than simply making the in-person course content available to online students. McCormack, Easton, and Morkel-Kingsbury (2015) highlight the need for online classrooms to be flexible and interactively intense while also accommodating an increasingly more diverse student body. Similarly, Rogerson-Revell (2015) contends that creators of online classrooms must shift the focus away from *delivery of content* to models that emphasize *collaborative learning*. This shift could include a greater number of small-group activities that encourage students to interactively build their knowledge-bases rather than passively absorbing lecture materials. Interactive group projects would serve to ameliorate feelings of isolation and could foster improved professional connections. Further, Rand and Pajarillo (2015) suggests that distance education can move beyond basic coursework and be employed in *distance mentorships* for emerging professionals, such as the doctor of nursing practice student-instructors in their program. The use of near-instantaneous support and consultation used in distance mentoring (as described by Rand & Pajarillo) could be useful in a variety of fieldwork settings while greatly enhance the learning experience.

Learning that counselors-in-training have experienced online education as convenient, solitary yet social, rigorous, self-enhancing, and potentially problematic provides ample arenas for explorations. As an example, these findings could be used to guide questions related to how these online realms compare to those experienced by counselors-in-training receiving a fully

face-to-face curriculum. And, beyond basic comparisons of subjective experiences, objective outcome studies could be developed to measure learning (e.g., comparisons of licensing examination scores or pass rates). Post-graduation, studies could be conducted to understand how potential employers may view graduates from such programs and compare hiring rates for online learners versus face-to-face learners. Still further, clients' perceptions of counselors could be investigated and effectiveness studies could examine treatment outcomes or client improvement for both online and face-to-face graduates of counseling training programs. Because distance education will continue to grow and evolve, it is imperative that counselor educators work to create programs that meet the needs of students but also allow for proper training and protection of clients and the public.

Conclusion

This study focused upon counselors-in-training and provided a portrait of how six individuals perceived the distance education experience. A qualitative approach was used to carefully identify common themes and through a reductionistic process, hour-long interviews were distilled into a succinct portrait of the phenomena. The data analysis revealed that online counseling students were predominately satisfied with their education experience despite some concerns. Notably, themes relating to convenience, separateness, connectedness, self-efficacy, and stigma were identified. Their experiences and the emergent themes command deeper consideration and can be used to guide future research efforts and may help to inform the development of high-quality counselor education programs.

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