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## The Client Role in a Pre-Practicum Counseling Skills Course

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# The Client Role in a Pre-Practicum Counseling Skills Course

## **Abstract**

This study explored the experience and process of counselors in training enacting the client role and sharing “real life” experiences during role-playing exercises in a pre-practicum skills course. Using Charmaz’ Grounded Theory, main themes and processes were identified and explored. Through multiple individual interviews and a final focus group, the participants described how the experience facilitated their development of empathy for the client experience. The findings suggest a possible link between the development of empathy for the client experience and sharing “real life” experiences while enacting the client role, and encourage further study into this type of learning experience.

## **Keywords**

Pre-Practicum, Client Role, Basic Skills, Empathy Development, Role-Play

A significant part of the learning experience in any counselor training program is the basic skills class that occurs before the practicum course. This class fulfills a Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) requirement regarding study in Helping Relationships (CACREP, 2009) in which counselors-in-training (CITs) learn and practice basic counseling skills. According to Woodard and Yii-Nii (1999), pre-practicum is “necessary for counselor training because it bridges the gap between course work and practicum-internship” (p. 142). A pre-practicum skills course provides CITs with experiences that allow them to experiment with and adjust to their new roles as counselors (Woodard & Yii-Nii, 1999).

Experiential activities during the pre-practicum course, often taking the form of role-playing, are viewed as essential to effective counselor training and are related to the development of self-efficacy and comfort in the counselor role (Levitov, Fall, & Jennings, 1999). The role-playing experiential activity allows the CIT to practice basic skills in a non-clinical setting. There is some variation in the structure of role-playing activities in regard to the non-clinical client population with which CITs practice, but often this population is made up of the CITs themselves (Levitov et al., 1999). This type of structure typically follows the Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR) role-play method (Kagan, Schauble, Resnikoff, Danish, & Krathwohl, 1969), wherein one CIT enacts the counselor role and another enacts the client role while additional CITs or the instructor observe the counseling interaction.

CITs enacting the client role are sometimes encouraged to share personal problems or “real life” experiences during the role-play experience, as it can be difficult to effectively enact a “made-up” client (Weiss, 1986). Although the efficacy of this self-disclosure in creating a

valuable learning experience for the CIT in the role of the counselor has been explored (Kasdorf & Gustafson, 1978), there has been no research on the experiences of CITs in the client role beyond noting their discomfort regarding the sharing of personal information and noting the ethical dilemmas that can arise with this self-disclosure (Levitov et al., 1999; Rabinowitz, 1997; Weis, 1986). It is not known whether this experience is incidental to counselor education, or if it has a developmental impact on the counselor in training who is enacting the client role.

The basic framework for pre-practicum role-playing has remained largely unchanged since the initial development of pre-practicum coursework detailed by Miller (1968). Modern innovations have focused on enhancing the role-playing experience through the use of client actors (Levitov et al., 1999) and the addition of screenwriting techniques (Shepard, 2002). Researchers have also focused on replacing the role-play experience with videotape (Larson et al., 1999) and large group role-plays with the professor playing a consistent client role (Rabinowitz, 1997). Larson et al. (1999), in particular, studied the relationship between role-play experiences and counselor self-efficacy; however they focused only on gains in the self-efficacy of the student enacting the counselor role. A review of the studies above reflects a tendency for counselor educators to focus only on the counselor role in role-playing experiences.

The experience and process of enacting the client role in pre-practicum may impact several factors related to the early stages of counselor development. Areas of particular interest include early experiences in the development of CITs and the development of empathy and cognitive skills. Furr and Carrol (2003) and Howard, Inman, and Altman (2006) discussed the concept of “critical incidents” in counselor development, which are specific instances where key concepts and roles in counseling become clear and understandable by CITs. These incidents,

both positive and negative, can strongly influence CIT confidence level, skill development, and both interpersonal and intrapersonal growth including the development of empathy.

An exploration of themes in counselor development by Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) found that interpersonal experiences had a greater impact on development and building understanding of the counseling role. Experiential activities in particular were described as having a greater emotional impact overall by CITs. Activities that led to an overall better understanding of the counseling process, including an acceptance of ambiguity, were also highlighted (Howard et al., 2006). Empathy development has also been reviewed in relation to its change from the first year of instruction to the second year (Lyons & Hazler, 2002), its connection to moral development (Bowman & Reeves, 1987), and its relationship with multicultural competence (Richardson & Molinaro, 1996). However, there have been no studies to date on the development of empathy as it relates to role-play or other experiences of being a counseling “client.”

There is a limited amount of research on pre-practicum (Levitov et al., 1999; Woodside, Oberman, Cole, & Carruth, 2007) and less on the experience of CITs enacting the client role in role-playing exercises. There is no research at all on what impact the sharing of “real life” experiences while enacting the client role has on the learning experience for CITs. Because experiential and interpersonal activities during counselor education programs impact counselor development in a number of areas (Furr & Carol, 2003; Howard et al., 2006; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992), role-playing experiences during pre-practicum should share their focus. With this focus, and further research into this area of counselor education, “best practices” can be developed for basic skills coursework. This study sought to address this research gap through an exploration of the experience and process of the CIT enacting the client role and sharing “real

life” experiences in pre-practicum role-play. To this end, this study looked to answer the following questions: What is the experience and process of the participants enacting the client role and sharing real life experiences during role-playing exercises while learning pre-practicum counseling skills? What impact does this experience and process have on their development as counselors in training?

## **Methodology**

### **Charmaz’ Grounded Theory**

This study addressed the research questions via a qualitative grounded theory design that followed the work of Charmaz (2006), a constructivist view that embraces the development of the theory as an overall construction built from the relationship between the researcher and the data. As this research was primarily aimed at learning about the process of enacting the client role in a pre-practicum class, it was important to use a method that allows the richness of the individual experience to be expressed. This approach emphasizes the subjectivity of the relationship between the researcher and the participants, along with the co-construction of knowledge. Charmaz (2002) argued that constructivism in grounded theory research is not only desirable, it is necessary because “Data [does] not provide a window on reality. Rather, the ‘discovered’ reality arises from the interactive process and its temporal, cultural, and structural contexts” (p. 523-524). Because the pre-practicum course studied was one where CIT work together in groups, it was believed the views of the participants towards the client experience would be socially constructed. To this end, this study had a particular focus on using a social constructivist paradigm. Social constructivism is a viewpoint that values the individual views of the participants in the research, which are often socially and historically negotiated (Creswell, 2007).

## **Pre-Practicum Course**

The structure of the pre-practicum course utilized for this study followed a format where CITs learned and practiced basic skills in work groups of four to five, lead by doctoral students and utilizing the IPR model. Apart from three to four days of in-class lecture on the skills, the bulk of the course consisted of role-playing experiences within these small groups. The membership of each group stayed consistent over the course of the semester.

CITs enacting the client role were encouraged to share real life experiences, but were not required to do so. Those who chose to do so were asked to share experiences and problems that were both current and not more appropriate for professional counseling. Mild anxiety related to being in a new program, for example, was viewed as appropriate, whereas an exploration of childhood sexual abuse was not. Those CITs who chose not to share their personal experiences typically played a client character, which was either created by the counselors in training themselves or borrowed from a case history, acquaintance, or popular media.

## **Participant Selection**

Four participants were sought from the first-year cohort of the masters program in counseling at a large northwestern university. The Institutional Review Board of the university approved the research, and all applicable ACA and ACES ethical codes for research were followed. The class was given a short presentation about the research study on the first day of the course. Participants were informed that their participation was completely voluntary and failure to participate would not impact their course grade in any way. They were also informed that the researcher was neither involved with this pre-practicum class as a supervisor nor as an instructor, and had no direct input on their course grading.

A sign-up paper was distributed to each member of the class on which they wrote their name and contact information if they were interested in the study. The 18 students who volunteered were contacted for a short interview before the final selection was made. During this interview, the informed consent form was reviewed with the volunteer, focusing on confidentiality, their time commitment, and the interview process for the study. Volunteers were then asked questions to gauge their overall interest and their willingness to provide the richness of data that was sought for this study. All of the volunteers stated that they planned on sharing their real life experiences while in the client role rather than creating a fictional client to role-play.

Purposeful sampling was used to choose four participants from the pool of 18 volunteers. Historically, this sampling type has been the most commonly used in research that is more “field-oriented” and not concerned with statistical generalizability (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). The overall goal in regard to sampling was to generate a varied group of participants in order to best explore the richness and variations of the experience and process, as well as its relationship with counselor development. To meet this goal, the demographic factors for each potential participant were reviewed, and participants were sought from different work groups within the pre-practicum course. An effort was made to choose participants who represented a variety of demographic factors, including gender, age, and racial/cultural identity.

Two of the participants were male and two were female. Their ages ranged from the mid 20s to mid 50s. There was a lack of racial diversity in the pool of volunteers, and thus all four identified as Caucasian. Each participant was given a letter from A to D, and asked to choose a name beginning with that letter that would then act as their pseudonym. The names chosen by the two female participants were Abby and Carolyn, and the two males were Bo and Devin.



## **Saturation**

The concept of saturation was carefully considered when conducting this study, given the small number of participants. The goal with this study was to reach saturation through meeting what Lincoln and Guba (1985) define as a “prolonged engagement”, involving a significant number of interviews over the course of the entire semester. Creswell (2007) noted that saturation is reached when the researcher comes to a point where new information that adds to the understanding of a category can no longer be found. By the third round of interviews, it became clear to the participants and the researcher that no new themes were evident in their experience. The focus group confirmed this, as the conversation focused solely on exploring and clarifying existing information despite multiple opportunities to share new themes or experiences.

In addition to the above, an article by Guest et al. (2006) was reviewed that explored the concept of saturation in regard to finding themes within qualitative interviews. Within their data set, the study showed through a statistical analysis that little was missed in the initial interviews, with 97% of the common categories developed within 12 interviews regardless of the number of interviewees. It was anticipated that saturation of themes related to the experience and process of the client role in a pre-practicum role-playing experience would be reached as the final number of interviews greatly exceeded the number described by Guest et al. (2006). Aside from the 12 informational interviews, 8 interpretive dialogues and 1 focus group were completed for a grand total of 21 interviews.

## **Interviews**

Four CITs were interviewed over the course of one semester in a pre-practicum counseling skills course. Intensive interviewing (Charmaz, 2006) was utilized, which allowed

for a rich and in-depth exploration of their experience and process. Intensive interviews begin with open-ended questions to elicit narratives regarding the experience, which are then explored through follow-up questions inviting further reflection. This differs from friendly conversation in that its focus is on in-depth exploration. Intensive interviewing goes beneath the surface level of the initial narrative into the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the participant (Charmaz, 2006).

Each intensive interview was followed by an interpretive dialogue interview (Coe Smith, 2006), with the exception of the final intensive interview, which was followed by a focus group. The first intensive interview occurred approximately three weeks after the beginning of the semester. At this time, each participant had the opportunity to enact the client role in a role-play experience at least once. After a short reiteration of the confidentiality procedures, the interview itself began with the following question: What has it been like for you to role-play the client in this class?

Follow-up questions were based on the specific responses given by each participant. This same basic question was given during each round of interviews. Charmaz (2006) cautioned that interview questions must be, “sufficiently general to cover a wide range of experiences” (p. 29). She also stated that an interviewer’s questions “shape the context, frame, and content of the study” (p. 32). The choice to use the same question to begin each interview responded to these assertions by providing a very general starting point for the participants to structure the content of the interview based on their individual experiences.

After each intensive interview, the responses were coded for themes and analysis of experiential categories began. The second interview took place at approximately mid-semester, and the third close to the semester’s end. During the latter two intensive interviews, the focus was first on briefly reviewing the coding and analysis done to date with the participants.

Participants were then asked about new experiences since the previous interview, discussed how they may relate to the previous analysis, and identified and explored new themes as they emerged.

Following each intensive interview and after initial coding and analysis, each participant was contacted for an interpretive dialogue interview (Coe Smith, 2006). This type of interview aims to include the participants of the study in the analysis of their own experience, and allows the construction of “multi-voiced interpretations, thereby increasing the representativeness and credibility of the interpretive analysis research” (Coe Smith, 2006, p. 48). These interviews were done individually with each participant, and were structured in a way that allowed them the opportunity to review and validate the codes constructed thus far. They also reviewed the analysis constructed using their previous interviews and were given the opportunity to make changes, or offer further exploration when they did not have a desired level of “fit” with their experience.

In order to address the social constructivist paradigm used for this study, the final interpretive dialogue interview was replaced with a focus group. The focus group consisted of all of the participants and the researcher. The process was similar to the interpretive dialogues, but allowed for the examination of the developed theory by the group as a whole and accounted for the social construction of many of the themes. Due to the inability to provide complete confidentiality for the focus group, participants were encouraged to discuss only what personal experiences they felt comfortable sharing with the rest of the group.

After each interview, the tapes were transcribed and the transcriptions reviewed using open coding. The thematic concepts described by the participants were organized into codes so that their overall relationship with each other, both categorically and in regard to their temporal

and causal nature, could be explored. Through coding, the goal was to not only to capture the symbolic nature of the experiences for each participant, but to do so in a way that was both specific and accounted for the individuality of each experience. The initial codes were constructed during the first round of interviews; and added to, refined, and re-categorized as needed through all the following interviews. In addition, codes were shared and co-analyzed with the participants during the interpretative dialogue interviews.

### **Credibility**

In grounded theory methodology there is a focus on the credibility of that theory such that it accurately and fully describes the process of interest (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This study focused specifically on addressing credibility through generating rich data, ensuring confidentiality, accurate representation of interviews through recording and transcription, and the incorporation of participants' input into the developing theory via interpretive dialogues and the focus group. The generation of rich data was achieved through an interview style that went beyond surface level conversation and worked to explore all facets of the pre-practicum experience in regards to the client role. Affective components were explored, as well as beliefs, reactions, reflections, cultural values, questions, and opinions. Each interview continued until both the participant and the researcher agreed that there was nothing left in their current experience to explore. Beyond the interviews themselves, gathering rich data also involved the interpretive dialogues and the final focus group.

### **Grounded Theory**

The experience and process of enacting the client role and sharing real life experiences in a pre-practicum course for the four participants in this study was comprised of five major themes called: ambiguity, being evaluated, learning skills from the other side, being the client, and

“getting the hang of this.” The themes themselves, and the participants’ relationship with them, changed over the course of the semester through the influence of two key learning processes. Two trends were also identified that serve to illustrate how participants’ attitudes and understanding changed over the course of the semester. The development of trust and empathy during this process was enhanced by the familiarity and rapport generated between the members of the small group environments in the course. This experience had a positive impact for the participants in relation to their development of empathy for the client experience that led to an overall better understanding of the counseling process as a whole. The following sections will review each of the five major themes, the components of the process that impacted those themes during the course, and the impact of the small group environment.

### **Ambiguity**

Anxiety and confusion characterized the initial experiences of enacting the client role in this pre-practicum course. The theme ambiguity encompassed many of these experiences, and was most prominent in the beginning of the pre-practicum experience. Participants described their confusion in just what they were supposed to do while in the client role, and shared that while they were given plenty of instruction on how to be a counselor, they were given little to no instruction on how to be a client.

Devin – “The client role is similar to the program (in that) it’s very ambiguous, but as you just do it, and try it, you learn that way. And then your guidance is kind of like, go into that dark room and feel around and if you get close to the porcupine I’ll tell you.”

Experiences related to it were described less frequently in the middle of the experience and rarely near the end. Participants explained the diminishing presence of this theme as being related to the continued lack of information on how they were expected to enact the client role.

Over time the participants came to the conclusion that the client role doesn't matter in regard to their grade in the course. Some participants began to view their experiences in the client role as another part of the learning process in the course.

Abby – “I don't know if they meant to or if it's just me, but I feel like this is preparing us to be counselors because we're putting on different hats. I'm putting on the client cap and now I go back and be the observer and the next time I'm the counselor. And so there's definitely a switch of what I'm supposed to do. And it's almost like a well-oiled machine now. Like, we just do it, we're next, we talk about it and move on.”

### **Being Evaluated**

Experiences related to being observed and the participants' perceptions of judgment were detailed in the next main theme being evaluated. Enacting the client role in the pre-practicum course is something that is done publicly, in that the role-playing dyad is observed by other CITs in the class through a two-way mirror. In addition to the observers, each practice room is equipped with recording equipment that allows for the professor teaching the course to observe dyads while they are practicing. Participants described a sense of “always being watched” and reported that while sharing real life experiences they felt their level of competency and fit within the program was constantly being judged, particularly in the beginning of their experience in the course.

Abby – “There's this pervading anxiety that, you know, there's a judgment of ‘not worthy to be here.’ You feel that mostly in the counselor role, but it seems that you're feeling it in the client role too, just in a different way.”

Participants' experience with being evaluated was closely related to the psychological concept called imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978), where individuals will often attribute

their success to deceiving others rather than to their own abilities or competency. For these reasons, the possibility of being watched and evaluated when they were in any role was anxiety provoking. Experiences related to this theme also included instances where participants in the client role were aware of their fellow CITs watching the role-play session from behind the two-way mirror.

Abby – “It’s the whole being judged unsuitable piece. It’s not just, you know, having issues or something, but also it’s almost like you have to appear strong. That you can do this and ... you picked me for a reason and I can do it.”

### **Learning Skills From the Other Side**

Participants in this study often described learning experiences related to the role of the client, which is not given the same focus as the role of the counselor in the course. The participants described how these experiences had a strong connection to learning counseling skills and the development of their empathy for clients. Two main themes categorized these experiences into those that directly related to skill development (learning skills from the other side) and those that related more to developing empathy with the client experience (being the client).

The theme learning skills from the other side contained experiences related primarily to understanding the value of counseling skills, as opposed to the learning related to their proper use that was done in the counselor role. Participants described having a very analytical view of the skills initially and found that they were able to connect with the skills both conceptually and emotionally through being on the receiving end. The sharing of real life experiences made being on the receiving end “more personal” and aided in the understanding of how powerful the skills could be.

Bo – “...I think that’s just the power of those feeling reflections. I’m really starting to see how that works, when I’m a client and they did nail those feeling reflections. It’s like, yeah, I do (feel that way). I’m going to start talking about that a little more.”

Devin – “I could go with this (unpleasant) feeling, but he’s giving me an exit, so I’m going to take it. It reminded me, too, of the power that the counselor has. Because if they would have jumped back to (the feeling) sad, it would have kept me there.”

The concept of rapport was also significant in the overall experience of the client role and was impactful both in regard to the CITs feelings of safety and trust, as well as the learning experience related to rapport as a concept.

Carolyn – “There are other times, if the counselor (and I have) a really good connection, being observed goes away and I totally become the client.”

### **Being the Client**

Being the client included the very personal experience of enacting the client role that directly contributed to participants’ empathy with the client experience as a whole. One experience that was present throughout the experience was that of gaining new personal awareness as a result of exploring real life problems while enacting the client role. Participants discussed the personal growth they had made, including becoming more comfortable with their own emotions and recognizing negative patterns. These experiences were described by participants as being particularly valuable learning moments, and helpful in understanding the purpose and power of the counseling process. Participants also described how their own learning experience as a client helped them gain deeper insight into the process of counseling itself.

Devin – “I think one of the big things I’ve recently been noticing as the client is that, you know, some days you feel like you made some good progress. You’re like, oh, I learned



something real good about myself. You know, this will help. And then other days you come in and you feel like you made no progress because maybe that's a more stressful day or whatever it might be. And you realize that, you know, as the counselor you might have someone who kind of feels like, man, things are going really good. And then the next time they come in, they moved back, somewhat back to square one sometimes because you're hitting him with whatever it is that, you know, stressed [them] out. So it's a good reminder that things shift and things change..."

### **Getting the Hang of This**

The analysis of the final theme, getting the hang of this, changed in meaning over the course of the semester. Initially, the theme was conceptualized as participants' descriptions of feeling like they were starting to understand the experience, including all of the roles they played throughout the course.

Bo – "It's like a kid going to the swimming pool for the first time. They have a little idea of what the swimming pool is, and they're in the car... and they see it and they're kind of like, whoa, that's pretty big. Then they dive in and they look, you know, ridiculous trying to swim. But then they get the hang of it and it becomes more fun and natural and the next thing you know they're diving in head first having a ball. I'm probably the awkward kid flailing in the water right now. Not badly... I'm just trying to keep my head up and we'll all get the motions right eventually. I feel like I'm at where I should be."

Near the mid-point of the semester and the second round of interviews the bulk of the experiences placed within getting the hang of this related to participants' thoughts regarding how their experiences related to the profession of counseling and their role as a counselor. During the last set of interviews, as well as the focus group, the understanding of this theme changed again

as it became clear to the researcher and participants that the experiences within this main theme included the learning process by which the participants were using their experiences within the client role to better understand counseling.

### **Process**

Two learning processes related to enacting the client role were identified by the participants and occurred throughout their experience. The first involved their sense of personal growth connected to sharing their real life problems and stories within a counseling experience, and having the opportunity to examine their patterns and emotional experience. Participants spoke of having a new appreciation for the value of counseling and the power of the basic skills they were being taught, as they could now see that they worked through their experience of being on the receiving end of them.

Devin – “I think I’ve kind of run the full gamut, you know, finally came to where I really appreciate the client role, whereas before it was annoying for a while. It still is somewhat, but... It’s not always pleasant, but I think it’s a good experience.”

They also spoke of becoming more interested in seeking personal counseling to explore problems that they were not comfortable sharing in the role-play experiences.

The second learning process was the development of empathy for the client experience and involved participants’ experiences with developing rapport, trust, frustration, safety, personal growth, and power. Participants described having a better sense of what their clients will be experiencing and how this knowledge will help them better attend to their clients’ needs for support and challenge.

Carolyn – “I have to feel safe. I think that’s because in any counselor-client relationship, you have to have that safety. And so I think that even in pre-practicum you have to have

that. And because I've experienced it not being there, I've recognized it. And (now) I'm more aware of how important it is. Because I know what it's like to feel unsafe and it really stifles my voice."

A critical factor in the development of empathy, as described by the participants, was the opportunity to process their experiences in the client role during the interviews for this study. The participants also stated that the development of empathy was tied to their use of real life experiences while in the client role.

Abby – "Not only do I have empathy, but an understanding of the time it takes to build that relationship and the fact that sometimes it can... not be torn down, that relationship, but it can kind of be bruised a little bit."

Devin – "It's definitely going to help me spot when someone is uncomfortable with feeling emotions and it's going to help me explain (why) to them, or to help them get there themselves."

During the final focus group, the researcher and participants identified two areas of attitude and understanding that gradually changed throughout the course and had a strong impact on their experience with the five themes. These were labeled as trends. The first trend involved becoming more comfortable with the client role over time and was related to both the lack of professor evaluation regarding their time spent in the client role and the participants' gradual acceptance of ambiguity. The second trend was the development of a better understanding of counseling and included the aforementioned development of empathy for the client experience. Both of the trends were connected in that the development of understanding and empathy took place for the participants only after they had begun to feel more comfortable with the client role. Overcoming their initial anxiety helped them become more open to the learning process.

## **Environmental Factor**

The small group environment format for the class had an impact on the overall experience and process of participants. Two of the participants discussed how their positive experiences and feelings of trust that were engendered by the smaller and more intimate environment within the groups helped them to become more comfortable with the client role. The positive experiences also enhanced their development of empathy due to an increased sense of familiarity and rapport with CITs in the counselor role. One initial exception to this influence during the first half of the course was a participant's description of a group environment where she felt unsafe due to the feeling that a classmate was disrespecting her. Her experience of this environment impacted her feelings of comfort in the client role until this situation was resolved during the latter part of the semester. The participant reported, however, that this experience did not negatively impact her development of empathy. She spoke instead of having a better knowledge of how feeling safe and respected can impact the counseling process.

## **Discussion and Implications**

This study raises important questions for other basic skills training courses that use role-play experiences. These results suggest that learning processes related to the development of empathy are possible within other courses using a similar role-playing model where students share real life experiences in the client role. The universal agreement among participants in this study was that sharing real life experiences while enacting the client role significantly aided in their development of empathy for clients. The participants also shared similar experiences related to how this development of empathy was experienced. Furthermore, participants stated that this learning process relied on their sharing of real life experiences, as well as their ability to process their experiences with the researcher during interviews.

The sharing of real life experiences during role-play experiences has been controversial and raised questions regarding the ethical implications of asking CITs to do so (Levitov et al., 1999; Rabinowitz, 1997; Weis, 1986). This is due to the fact that typically the counselor educator responsible grading the CIT enacting the counselor role will hear the personal problems shared by the CIT enacting the client role. That counselor educator may then develop an opinion of that student's competency, based on the personal problems that were shared, that can impact their ability to impartially grade that student. In addition, it is possible that the vulnerability experienced by students who share personal issues in front of faculty and fellow students will negatively impact their sense of safety and overall wellness within their counseling program.

Because the sharing of real life experiences in the client role can be related to the development of empathy, inviting CITs to focus on personal experiences becomes more justifiable. The participants in this study acknowledged their discomfort with evaluators of this course hearing their personal experiences, but at the same time explained that this simply meant that they were less likely to share experiences that could paint them in a negative light. In addition, they stated that they trusted faculty members to do their best not to use what they heard while they were in the client role to judge their performance in the counselor role. During the focus group, the participants stated that they felt that the richness of their learning relied on their sharing of "real life" experiences and that they felt this was worth the risk.

An unexpected result was the participants' assertion that their learning experience related to the client role was enhanced through their interviews with the researcher during the study. Participants explained that there was no other structured outlet that they could use to reflect on or process their experiences within the client role. Factors that contributed to the value of the interviews for included the unstructured nature of the interviews themselves, since there was an

effort to follow themes and experiences that they brought up. Another valuable factor noted was the lack of involvement of the researcher for their grading in the course. Based on the suggestions of the participants, adding a reflective activity to process the experiences in the client role is an addition that may help to encourage the development of empathy for the client experience. Participants also stated that the reflective activity would need to allow for their self-selection of the topic discussed and they would need to know that the content of their responses would not impact their grade in the course.

The significance of the small group environment is another finding that could impact future course construction. For basic skills training courses that use a small group format, inviting discussion and process of group dynamics could also positively impact the experience in the client role and the learning process related to empathy development. Even in large group formats, the inclusion of group process discussion has the potential to positively impact CITs' feelings of safety and respect.

Due to the relationship between the two trends involving becoming comfortable in the client role and the development of empathy, support for CITs in becoming comfortable in the client role would appear to positively impact this process. This support could involve discussion aimed at reducing ambiguity by clearly spelling out expectations regarding the client role. Participants in this study began to understand that their actions in the client role did not impact their grade primarily due to the lack of feedback and discussion regarding that role. Addressing this ambiguity early on in the course could help to reduce anxiety and allow for more open processing of the experience during the aforementioned reflective exercises.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

The intent of this study was to explore and co-construct the experience and process of enacting the client role with four CITs in a pre-practicum counseling skills course. The results of this study are intended to give counselor educators a window into the kinds of processes that occurred within the current pre-practicum structured course and to show that the learning process related to the development of empathy is possible. Credibility was addressed through the collection of rich data, ensuring confidentiality, ensuring that interviews were accurately represented, and incorporating the input of the participants. At the conclusion of this study, it is believed that all of these points were addressed adequately and thus contributed to the credibility of the grounded theory.

Areas that could be addressed in future studies of this type include the choice to use “real life” experiences, design of the pre-practicum course, demographics of the participants, participant selection, and the types of interviews. First, the choice to share real life experiences itself could be the focus of further study. Examining the development of empathy and other factors in CITs who choose to use made-up experiences in pre-practicum role-plays could be explored, and even compared to those who choose to share real life experiences.

The design of the pre-practicum course, was a significant influence on the experience and process of the participants. It is accurate to say that this study focused on the experience and process of CITs in this particular pre-practicum course. Future studies could focus on the client role experience within alternate course structure, including those that do not use small groups, doctoral students, or observation behind two-way mirrors. For example, it was clear from the data that the small group environment was a critical factor in the experience of the participants.

Experiences in the themes ambiguity and being the client could be dramatically different in pre-practicum course designs that do not utilize a small group format.

The demographics of the participants are another factor that influenced the grounded theory, in that all four of the participants came from very similar cultural backgrounds. Because different cultures can have different attitudes towards the sharing of personal information, themes in the grounded theory may have looked very different had there been greater cultural diversity. Future studies could focus on programs in areas of greater cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity to examine what themes and processes emerge.

The participant selection also influenced the outcome of this study, as the participants chosen from the volunteer sample were those who were talkative, interested in the study, and who planned on using real life experiences while enacting the client role. The possibility exists that the participants that were chosen had a vested interest in appearing “good”, as the researcher was a doctoral student in the department. If chosen participants were less talkative, moderately interested, or unsure about what they would share while enacting the client role, the findings regarding the learning process may have differed. Future studies could explore the experience and process of a larger group of students, possibly through the use of anonymous written journals to account for those students who are interested in sharing their process, but who are not interested in being interviewed face-to-face.

The types of interviews also significantly impacted these results. The energy and enthusiasm from the participants during the focus group was palpable. Thus, the use of group interviews throughout the experience may have had a much stronger influence on the social construction of the themes and the process, particularly given the impact the group environment had on participants’ feelings of safety within the course. The use of face-to-face interviews was



also impactful, in that participants may have been more hesitant to share certain aspects of their experiences in this format. The previously mentioned use of anonymous written journals could also account for this factor. A limitation to this approach, however, would be the decreased opportunity to co-construct the themes and process with participants in the moment.

The development of empathy for the client experience is an important learning process in counselor education. This learning process for participants in this study included a strong focus on the development of empathy for the client experience, and was directly related to their use of real life experiences in the client role and the opportunity to process the experience during the research interviews. The grounded theory provides an examination of a specific instance of an educational process that has the potential to encourage the development of empathy in CITs. Although this research study focused on the experiences of four CITs in a specific course environment, the above implications invite exploration into the experiences of CITs in other pre-practicum course designs and other courses that involve role-play experiences. The process of enacting the client role in a pre-practicum skills course should be further studied, so that best practices can be developed and the empathy development of CITs can be optimally supported.

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