

Summer 8-6-2013

# The Lived Experiences of Master's Level Counseling Students in Beginning Skills Classes: A Qualitative Study

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The Lived Experiences of Master's Level Counseling Students in Beginning Skills Classes:  
A Qualitative Study

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
In partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
in  
Counselor Education

by

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B.A., University of Louisiana at Monroe, 1985  
M.Ed., University of Louisiana at Monroe, 2000

August 2013

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this to stairwell dwellers everywhere.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge my sons, Justin Keith and Joseph Addison for giving me permission to pursue my dream. Parenting my children has been my biggest accomplishment and my boys have made that an easy job. You guys are amazing! I would also like to say thank you to my partner, Dr. Rodney Wise, without whom this would have not been possible. He has stood by me and given me so much; words alone could never express the depth of my gratitude. To my friend Dee Bullock I say this. If a soul-mate by definition is the “other you” and a rarity to have experienced, then I have been truly blessed to have known you. Thank you for seeing me through each crisis and for always answering the phone.

For my friends, old and new alike, Dr. Lyn Kieltyka, Dr. Corrie DeLorge Minges, and Chris Redden, I want you each to know how much you mean to me. Lyn for making my time in New Orleans a little less lonely, Corrie for asking me to sit at her table all those years ago, and Chris for being so supportive and helpful. I could not have asked for better buddies! For my unknowing role-model, Mrs. Veronique Salvato, thank you for your acceptance, support, and friendship. To my mother, Mrs. Barbara Knight, one of the strongest women I have known, I owe you the biggest debt of all. Thank you for all the sacrifices.

I would like to recognize my committee members, Dr. Barbara Herlihy, Dr. Zarus Watson, and Dr. Michael Gomila. I appreciate your time and the consideration you have shown me. Thank you for your support and guidance over the past seven years.

And finally I would like to acknowledge the Chair of my dissertation committee, Dr. Roxane Dufrene. I do not believe I have ever worked so hard and been held to such a high standard of performance in terms of what was expected from me through this process. I will always be grateful to you for that and for making this work meaningful. You taught me how to

work smart, “tried” to teach me to be more patient, but above all you reaffirmed my belief about first impressions. For all this, thank you to my mentor and my friend.

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## **Abstract**

According to McAuliffe and Lovell (2006), regardless of the training received in skills classes, master's level counseling students continue to be rote in their approach to clients and their use of counseling skills as opposed to understanding how skills fit into the helping process. Students also experience confusion manifested by fear, anxiety, self-doubt, and questioning of abilities to perform the required skills (Skovholt & Jennings, 2005). The purpose of this research study was to explore the lived experiences of master's level counseling students in a beginning counseling skills class. I used Perry's (1970) scheme of cognitive and intellectual development as a framework for my study. Participants were nine students from three counseling programs in the southern part of the United States, selected by criterion sampling. I used a psychological phenomenological design to gain insights into the nine counseling students' skills-learning experiences. Data collection methods included student interviews, weekly journals, and course syllabi. To analyze the data, I used a modified version of Moustakas' (1994) six-step method of data analysis. Four themes resulted from my data analysis: (1) developmental progression, (2) instructional methodology, (3) personal reactions, and (4) pre-defined structures. These themes were used to answer my three research sub-questions and the central research question. Based on the results of my study, students believed that class format, teaching interventions, personality traits, experiences outside of class, peers, time and class schedules influenced their learning of beginning counseling skills.

**Keywords:** Counseling Students, Developmental Model, Pedagogy, Perry's Scheme

## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

According to the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2012) the development of counseling skills is an essential component of the educational experience for beginning counselors. Equally important for new counselors is the ability to demonstrate knowledge-based competencies of counseling skills. Further, to be therapeutically effective, counseling students must understand the global context of how skills are applied and the intended purpose of using specific skills (Hawley, 2006).

Since the birth of the counseling profession, much has been written on pedagogical approaches to teaching counseling students and the markers of competency exhibited by students. Despite the wealth of literature that has emerged within the counseling profession, students remain confused in their attempts to understand basic counseling skills (Skovholt & Jennings, 2005). McAuliffe and Lovell (2006) commented that beginning counseling students continued to struggle with learning counseling skills and the counseling process, even after formal training. Miller (1997) added that the intentionality of students, when choosing a specific skill, should involve understanding the reason for choosing a specific skill. Miller suggested that attention be given to the reasons skills were used as opposed to the skills used. Ivey (1994) stated that counselors should understand how to use skills and be intentional in their use of skills. Understanding and intentionality when using counseling skills may not always be possible for beginning counseling students when learning skills because of their confusion that can be manifested by fear, anxiety, self-doubt, suspicion, and questioning of abilities (Skovholt & Jennings, 2005).

Abundant literature exists that describes how counseling skills are taught from a skills-model perspective (Little, Packman, Smaby, & Maddux, 2005); however, little has been written regarding the student perspective of learning experiences in beginning counseling skills classes. One way to gain an understanding of beginning students' skills-learning experiences is to obtain the perspectives of counseling students. In my study, I explored counseling students' lived experiences in their beginning counseling skills classes. Exploratory research into students' personal experiences and challenges when learning counseling skills, as well as the impact of pedagogical methods and techniques used in counseling skills classes, could be useful to advance counseling pedagogy (McAuliffe & Lovell, 2006).

### **Background**

CACREP (2012) developed standards and various state licensure requirements that address counselor educator responsibilities for designing counseling programs that meet the educational needs of students; however, the requirements do not specifically address the methods used when teaching students basic counseling skills. In many counseling programs, beginning counseling skills is one of the first exposures to the practice of counseling. During skill classes, students develop an understanding of counseling skills and learn to demonstrate each skill. The literature described how counseling skills are taught from a skills-model perspective (Little et al., 2005); however, little research has addressed students' perspectives of learning experiences in beginning counseling skill classes. McAuliffe and Lovell (2006) found that, when every effort was made to teach counseling skills, some students continued to have difficulty grasping beginning skills. The authors noted that students struggled with being in-tune with clients and had difficulty hearing what clients said. One student, interviewed by Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992), noted, "...at times I was so busy thinking about the instructions given in class and

textbooks, I barely heard the client” (p. 8). McAuliffe and Lovell (2006) stated that students were rote in their skills approach when working with clients and focused on demonstrating a skill, rather than understanding how a skill fit into the counseling process.

Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) found that counseling students tended to focus on skills demonstration and restricted their personal characteristics (e.g., humor). Students also tended to move away from the personal self in an attempt to be more professional (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). For example, findings revealed that students felt driven to demonstrate what the instructors perceived as appropriate skills and, in doing so, instructors restricted students’ personal attributes. Levitt and Jacques (2005) noted students’ difficulty in mastering beginning counseling skills in that the harder they attempted to learn and master skills, the less they engaged with clients. Levitt and Jacques also reported that the ambiguous nature of counseling—no concrete answers for specific problems—confounded students’ abilities to learn skills. Because of this ambiguous nature, students struggled with learning skills and thus they viewed counseling as more daunting than originally imagined. The vagueness of the counseling process created student confusion in knowing what is right or wrong, which led to an increase in student frustration.

Larson (1998) reported anxiety was a contributing factor in counseling students’ learning experiences and impacted students’ overall beliefs in their abilities to be effective counselors. Auxier, Hughes, and Kline (2003) found that counseling students expected typical educational experiences such as lectures, tests, and papers as a part of learning and, as their learning became more experiential, their anxiety levels increased. Schauer, Seymour, and Green (1985) noted that the very programs charged with training them to become counselors perpetuated counseling students’ anxieties. Schauer et al. commented that the primary method of counseling training

(e.g., observation and feedback) contributed to students' increased levels of anxiety and often interfered with the quality of training. In addition to how anxiety influenced student learning, were concerns with the inability to retain skills. In Collingwood's (1971) study, students were able to retain skills following training. In his study, 40 students showed a decrease in skills over a 5-month period after receiving 10 hours of beginning skills training. Collingwood attributed students' skills loss to an insufficient amount of training time to practice new skills. His findings also suggested that the lack of skills used post-training was another reason skills tended to diminish.

### **Conceptual Framework**

A conceptual framework is an explanation of the topic or the method to study a particular topic, including the main idea, purpose, and significance of the ideas of the study (Jabareen, 2009). The conceptual framework used in my study was William Perry's (1970) scheme of cognitive and intellectual development. Perry's framework was used to understand students' levels of cognitive complexities. Perry developed his theory to define the various levels of cognitive complexities as well as different cognitive structures of cognitive development. According to Perry (1970), students presented at a lower level of cognitive complexity when faced with new information, which tended to increase with exposure to new information. Of note, cognitive complexity is the mental processes of perception, reasoning, judgment, intuition, or knowledge (Granello, 2010). Perry's scheme comprises a continuum of four cognitive structures: (a) dualism: students see knowledge as either true or false, right or wrong, (b) multiplicity: students see absolutes in knowledge yet are open to the possibilities of other truths, (c) relativism: students see truth about knowledge as readily recognized and supported by evidence and all opinions carry equal weight, and (d) commitment: students take a stance and

commit to their formulated knowledge. Each structure indicates how students perceive knowledge based on their cognitive complexity. The more complex students' cognitions, the more likely they will transition to the next structure.

Young (2009) applied Perry's scheme in a study of counseling students and found that those in the dualistic structure believed that counseling responses to a client were either right or wrong. Student's dualistic thinking increased the pressure to perform and they were often overly concerned with performance. Taking a dualistic perspective, students believed their success or failure depended on which answer they chose. In comparison to dualistic thinking, Young noted that students in the multiplicity structure recognized that many responses were useful and correct. With the option of having multiple responses, students were overwhelmed by not knowing the response to choose and questioned the most appropriate responses. In the multiplicity structure, students became frustrated with professors for correcting their responses when all responses were viewed as feasible, whereas students in the relativistic structure differentiated among all responses and made appropriate choices depending on the situation (Young). Of note, Young did not comment on Perry's commitment structure because so few students reach this stage which is seen as theoretical.

Movement through the structures is constant and based on students' ability to absorb knowledge. Simpson, Dalgaard, and O'Brien (1986) agreed that students revert to the dualistic structure of thinking when presented with new information. The authors used Perry's model in an exploratory study that involved medical students and their perceptions of knowledge. Findings revealed that medical students, when required to learn large amounts of information, limited their decisions for treatment because they believed medical problems should be diagnosed with certainty. Simpson et al. found that medical students' decision-making capacities



were limited to their diagnostic capabilities by assuming such accuracy. To maximize learning opportunities for these students, instructors continually challenged them and promoted their problem-solving abilities while simultaneously pushing students from a dualistic to a multiplistic structure. The authors also noted that students who engaged in multiplistic thinking, avoided relativism. By yielding to the instructor, rather than taking a stand or making a commitment to treatment, students avoided a dispute between themselves and the instructor. Simpson et al. noted that, because medical students attempted to please various instructors and agreed with instructors' viewpoints, the learning environment should be considered. Using Perry's scheme, the authors were able to consider the learning environment, assess students cognitively, and design a suitable instructional program that facilitated student learning and development.

Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) agreed that students reverted to dualistic thinking when presented with new information and attempted to please instructors to avoid confrontation. In their study, students participated in learning activities and demonstrated skills in such a way to please the instructor. This response, pleasing the instructor, was supported as evidenced in theme four, "Beginning practitioners rely on external expertise, senior practitioners rely on internal expertise" (p. 510). Granello (2002) reported that only a small percentage of students were dualistic thinkers when they entered their counseling graduate programs. She also noted only a small increase in higher cognitive complexity occurred and no student reached the relativistic stage. Granello added that developmental models were useful for viewing students and suggested that, by knowing the developmental levels of students, counselor educators would better understand students in terms of learning.

## **Importance of the Study**

Counselor educators are charged with the responsibility of evaluating and assessing the counseling skills of master's level students (CACREP, 2012); however, CACREP does not specify how skills are to be taught. Daniels (1994) reviewed three training models used to teach counseling skills and concluded that training models (e.g., Ivey's microskills model) offered an effective means to teach counseling skills, but were not without problems. Recent research explored students' counseling skills in graduate programs and extended the research to models of teaching skills. Despite existing literature, research on students' perceptions of learning experiences remains limited (Al-Darmaki, 2004; Duys & Hedstrom, 2000). Additionally, little research has been conducted on beginning counseling students' feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, and frustration that may interfere with their abilities to learn skills (Guiffrida, 2005; Levitt & Jacques, 2005; Woodside, Oberman, Cole, & Carruth, 2007). Woodside et al. (2007) identified seven themes of students' learning experiences throughout their enrollment in counseling programs via a phenomenological study. Of these, four themes were directly related to learning skills, which included students': (1) decisions to become counselors, (2) self-doubt regarding skills acquisition, (3) learning of counseling skills, and (4) understanding the counseling process. One student characterized the learning experience by saying, "Okay, what if I mess someone else up? It [counseling] is so intimidating" (p.14). Although, research has been conducted on counseling students' learning experiences during their enrollment in counseling programs, qualitative research is needed on experiences of master's level counseling students in beginning skills classes to inform counselor educators of student challenges when learning these new skills.

## **Purpose of the Study**

CACREP (2012) and state counseling licensing boards make certain assurances of the standards required for counseling training programs. Accreditation standards and licensure requirements also address the obligations of counselor educators to ensure that counseling programs are designed to meet the needs of counseling students and increase student learning potential (Granello & Hazler, 1998). The CACREP standards require students to have demonstrated knowledge and experiences in 8 core areas that include the helping relationship and necessary counseling skills. McAuliffe and Lovell (2006) noted that students continue to have difficulty learning these skills. The literature regarding teaching methods for counseling skills is widespread (Little et al., 2005); however, little research has been conducted from a student perception of learning these skills. The purpose of my study was to use a qualitative method of inquiry to gain a better understanding of how students perceived their experiences in beginning counseling skills classes.

## **Research Questions**

A central research question is used to guide the study of a phenomenon and is characterized as the question of inquiry (Creswell, 2007). For my study, the central research question was: How do counseling students perceive their lived experiences in a beginning skills class? The following research sub-questions served to explore the central research question:

1. How do counseling students perceive their lived experiences regarding the teaching methods used in a beginning skills class?
2. How do counseling students describe their expectations prior to entering a beginning skills class?

3. What factors do counseling students perceive as helpful when learning counseling skills during a beginning skills class?
4. What factors do counseling students perceive as hindrances when learning counseling skills in a beginning skills class?
5. What personal experiences influence counseling students learning counseling skills?

### **Limitations of the Study**

Creswell (2003) defined limitations as possible weaknesses in a study. A potential limitation in the current study was the student sample. According to Creswell, qualitative research involves a small sample size that does not lend itself well to generalizing across an entire population. The sample in my study consisted of nine students enrolled in beginning counseling skills classes at three different universities. The results of my study cannot be generalized beyond the nine students who participated. A second limitation was the analysis and interpretation of the data. According to Creswell (2007) data can be interpreted differently depending on the individual who analyzes the data. A third limitation resided in the format of the counseling training programs at each university. Each university site had different training formats such as in-class practice sessions, counseling rooms equipped with two-way mirrors and recording devices, or coaches to assist counseling students in learning skills.

### **Delimitations of the Study**

Delimitations define a study or narrow the topic studied and include elements in a study that the researcher can control (Creswell, 2003). My study was delimited to a phenomenological inquiry. A further delimitation was that students in beginning counseling classes met the inclusion criteria set for participation. Specific inclusion criteria included master's level counseling students who: (1) were registered in a 3-credit hour, full semester beginning

counseling skills class; (2) had no prior experience in a counseling skills class or community service work that provided basic counseling skills; and (3) had no more than one absence from the beginning skills class over the course of the semester during the study.

### **Assumptions of the Study**

An assumption is the belief that something is true without supporting facts or evidence (Creswell, 1994). The first assumption of my study was that students' realities were impacted by the world in which they live and could not be separated, thus their realities cannot be generalized to other students. The second assumption was that students interviewed during my study had thoughts, feelings, or beliefs about what helped or hindered their training experiences. The third assumption was that counseling students in my study were willing participants. The fourth assumption was that students were honest in their answers to the interview questions. The fifth assumption was that the research design chosen was the most appropriate to answer the research questions.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Cognitive Complexity.** The mental process of knowing or having an awareness of events that include the mental processes of perception, reasoning, judgment, intuition, or knowledge (Granello, 2010).

**Commitment.** The act of making a choice or taking a stance regardless of what authority figures say (Perry, 1970).

**Counseling.** A process whereby goals are established with clients to overcome difficult or problematic issues (Young, 2009).

**Constructivism.** A perspective that views knowledge as a process that is based on an individual's experiences in conjunction with what he or she already believes to be true (Richardson, 2003).

**Developmental Model.** A conceptual framework that acts as a guide in understanding the cognitive complexity of an individual (Granello & Hazler, 1998).

**Dualism.** The understanding of knowledge as absolute-there is a right or wrong answer (Perry, 1970).

**Experiential learning.** A hands-on learning experience where learners are active students (Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998).

**Modernism.** A traditional approach to teaching described as one that the instructor imparts knowledge and students receive the knowledge (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 1999).

**Multiplicity.** The understanding that knowledge is not an absolute, rather everyone has an opinion that is equal (Perry, 1970).

**Pedagogy.** A method of teaching or style of teaching (Nelson & Neufeldt 1998).

**Perry's Scheme.** A developmental model that outlines how knowledge is acquired, viewed, or learned from the perspectives of the students (Perry, 1970).

**Relativism.** The understanding of meaning that is made with supporting evidence (Perry, 1970).

**Psychological Constructivism.** A learning concept driven by individual experiences that are negotiated within groups and individual experiences that are integrated into one's personal knowledge base (Richardson, 2003).

**Social Constructivism.** An understanding of knowledge that is developed based on what the individual already knows and is influenced by conditions such as values, social norms, and religious beliefs (Phillips, 2000).

## **Summary**

New counseling students face a number of challenges that range from learning new concepts and counseling skills to demonstrating these skills in practice. The literature in the counseling field, in general, is abundant; however, limited studies have focused on the lived experiences of new counseling students. As such, my study explored lived experiences of master's students in a beginning counseling skills class using Perry's scheme of cognitive and intellectual development as my theoretical framework. Data were collected via interviews, journals, and course syllabi to increase the understanding of learning new skills from the master's level counseling students' perspectives. The following chapter offers a literature review to support my research questions and methodology.

## **Chapter II**

### **Review of Literature**

The purpose of this chapter is to review the current literature relevant to the experiences of master's level counseling students in beginning skills classes. This chapter is organized into seven sections that address topics that impact students' experiences. In the first section, pedagogy is addressed from a constructivist and modernistic perspective. In the second section, counseling and counseling skills are discussed. Pedagogy and counseling models are addressed in the third section, with a review of advantages and disadvantages of these models. In the fourth section, developmental models are reviewed. In the fifth section, counseling students and their concerns about learning counseling skills are addressed. Psychological safety and ethical considerations are presented in the sixth section. Finally, a summary is provided in the seventh section.

### **Pedagogy**

Nelson and Neufeldt (1998) defined pedagogy as the art of teaching and the methods used to teach a subject and consist of different teaching strategies. Most pedagogical models rely on cognitively based instructional methods, such as lectures and written tests. McAuliffe and Eriksen (1999) stated that, within the world of counselor education, two teaching theories exist, modernism and constructivism. Modernistic pedagogy, a traditional approach, occurs when the instructor imparts knowledge and students receive that knowledge. Conversely, the constructivist approach is described as the instructor and students engaging in a collaborative relationship to increase student learning.

Guiffrida (2005) noted that, in a modernistic approach to teaching, knowledge is objective and reality-based and universal truths are to be discovered and proven. The task of the



modernistic teacher is to identify, organize, and present universal truths in a traditional lecture and test format. Modernism is not the desired approach; however, it is advantageous in reducing student anxiety. When a sequential pattern of information with a beginning, middle, and end is offered students can focus on the information presented. A disadvantage of the modernistic approach is that students are limited in their self-reflections on a topic, which limits their expansion of knowledge. Nelson and Neufeldt (1998) stated that, in the modernistic approach, information is merely presented and students are expected to demonstrate mastery of knowledge by rote memorization via tests or performance measures. Dollarhide, Smith, and Lemberger (2007) suggested that the modernistic approach promotes passivity, artificiality, and emotional vulnerability.

In contrast to the modernistic approach is the constructivist approach which, although not a new concept, has only recently gained attention (Richardson, 2003). Constructivists view knowledge as a process based on student experiences in conjunction with what is already believed to be true. Here, the learning process is an integration of existing knowledge with new knowledge that leads to a process of meaning-making. Phillips (2000) suggested two ways to view knowledge building. One view is the global social aspect and suggests that knowledge is developed based on what individuals already know and is influenced by conditions such as values, social norms, and religious beliefs. The second view is an individual or group-based psychological aspect and suggests that knowledge is formed based on personal experiences and the meaning assigned to those experiences.

Richardson (2003) suggested that concerning pedagogy, psychological constructivism is a more viable approach compared to social constructivism. She reasoned that learning continues to occur at an individual level even though it takes place in a social setting, such as a classroom.

Richardson also differentiated social constructivism from psychological constructivism. She believed that social constructivism is driven by global concepts such as politics or religion, whereas psychological constructivism is driven by individual experiences as negotiated within groups (e.g., a classroom). Ultimately, student experiences are integrated into a personal knowledge base. Richardson defined the constructivist approach to teaching as follows:

Constructivist pedagogy is thought of as the creation of classroom environments, activities, and methods that are grounded in a constructivist theory of learning, with goals that focus on individual students developing deep understanding in the subject matter of interest and habits of mind that aid in future learning. (p. 1627)

From the constructivist perspective, deeper meaning-making is accomplished by creating environments that are conducive to learning using experiential approaches. Nelson and Neufeldt (1998) suggested that, in experiential environments, students are encouraged to question, challenge, and evaluate what is presented as well as to invent new information. Experiential learning is hands-on where learners are active students, rather than passive students as with lecture style formats. Considering the counseling field, Duys and Hedstrom (2000) suggested that early exposure to counseling pedagogy, via practicing skills and incorporating experiential learning, promotes cognitive complexity. Further, Kim and Lyons (2003) suggested that consensus among counselor educators is the use of experiential teaching methods of student learning, rather than the use of traditional lecture-style formats. Experiential methods provide students with the opportunity to participate actively in learning, as well as the opportunity to implement new knowledge gained from a lecture-style format. To achieve this, counselor educators use teaching strategies such as role-play, reflection papers and journals, and coaching (i.e., doctoral student coaching master's students).

## **Counseling and Counseling Skills**

Initially, counseling was viewed as authoritative and the role of the counselor was to regulate or control the behaviors of the client (Blocher, 1987). Today, the counseling process is defined as a collaborative approach that focuses on the quality of the therapeutic relationship (Smaby & Maddux, 2010). The counseling process has moved from the idea of counselors as experts to one of counselors as helpers who work with a client to maximize his or her quality of life. Ivey (1994) described counseling as an intense and personal process that assists people in solving problems of day-to-day living and involves an intimate exchange of information between participating individuals with the end goal of enhanced psychological and emotional well-being. Similarly, Young (2009) defined counseling as a process in which counselors assist a person in the problem-solving process to reconcile problematic periods that are encountered during normal developmental milestones. From a broader perspective, Smaby and Maddux (2010) described counseling as the desire to help others deal with emotions and problems.

To facilitate the counseling process, counselors have at their disposal a set of counseling skills. Ivey (1994) defined counseling skills as sequential; skills build upon other skills. In Ivey's microskills model, counseling skills are taught beginning with basic attending skills and move up a hierarchy to more advanced basic skills. Basic skills include attending behaviors, eye contact, and body language. Observation is another basic skill that is used as a way to see and understand the unspoken words of a client. Counselors observe affective states, tones of voice, eye contact, and body movement that allow them to become in tune with what is happening with a client. Once attending skills are learned, additional beginning skills are added (e.g., reflection of feelings, summarization, paraphrasing, and questioning). Reflection of feelings is the process of hearing what a client says and assigning a feeling word to the statement to explore a client's

hidden messages (Ivey, 1994). Accurately implementing reflection of feelings leads to the establishment of rapport and the beginning of the therapeutic relationship. A summary provides a focused overview of what a client has said and demonstrates to the client that he or she and the counselor are viewing issues from the same perspective (Ivey, 1994). Finally, paraphrasing is similar to summarizing, except that counselors paraphrase what is communicated to let the client know that his or her message was heard. Counselors may also ask open or closed-ended questions. Open-ended questions solicit additional information, whereas closed-ended questions typically encourage a one-word response from the client. Both types of questions are a means to gather information and lead the session toward the desired goal.

The acquisition of beginning counseling skills leads to learning more skills, such as structuring and focusing counseling sessions or interviews. Ivey (1994) suggested that by using beginning skills and gradually incorporating other skills, counselors drive sessions with a purpose, bring sessions into focus, and, if needed, allow the counselor to confront a client to bring about change. At the upper-level of skill development, complex skills are introduced (e.g., confrontation and influencing skills). Confrontation, as defined by Ivey, allows counselors to identify a client's incongruent behaviors. Finally, influencing skills are those that address interpretations of behaviors, logical consequences of behaviors, disclosing personal information, advice giving, and being directive. Counseling skills learned are the same for all students; however, the means of teaching and learning such skills varies.

### **Pedagogical Counseling Models**

Teaching models of basic counseling skills include some form of experiential practice and several models are used in counselor education to teach basic skills. One model associated with counselor training is the interpersonal process recall training model developed by Kegan (as

cited in Daniels, 1994). In Kegan's model, students are instructed to view and reflect on their thoughts and feelings about the counseling sessions. Daniels reported that interpersonal process recall is grounded in the belief that beginning counseling students are not in tune with their counseling sessions. A contributing factor to this lack of awareness in sessions is anxiety and trying to meet instructor expectations (Kegan, as cited in Daniels, 1994). As a result, beginning students pay less attention to the content and dialogue of the sessions. Part of counselor training requires students to review counseling sessions to evaluate their thoughts and behaviors, which then leads to enhanced insight into counseling skills and abilities.

A second counseling skills model, microskills, developed by Ivey (1994) is primarily concerned with systematic skills acquisition and demonstration of a hierarchy of skills. As lower-level skills are mastered, higher-level skills are systematically taught. Daniels (1994) stated that Ivey's microskills model is effective for teaching higher-ordered skill sets, such as immediacy and self-disclosure. Daniels concluded that, although Kegan's and Ivey's models are taught from different premises, both are effective in teaching counseling skills to beginning counselors-in-training. Daniels noted that it is nearly impossible to state definitively the most suitable model to teach counseling skills.

A more recent model for training counselors is Guiffreda's (2005) emergent model that pushes students to implement interventions based on their personal characteristics and existing knowledge. In the emergent model, students are instructed to do what comes naturally as part of their natural helper characteristics. Within this model, the instructor creates a nonjudgmental atmosphere and provides feedback to encourage students to self-reflect on their selected counseling interventions and skills. The purpose of creating a practice atmosphere is not for students to demonstrate a right or wrong skill or intervention, but for them to realize what was

learned because of their practice (Guiffrida, 2005). The emergent model is effective because it allows for the use of what comes naturally to students when they are still under the guidance of the instructor. Guiffrida acknowledged concerns with this model. One concern is encouraging students to learn interventions first and theory second, which might lead students to ignore theory altogether. Guiffrida also noted that students tend to have higher levels of anxiety when they lack the knowledge base from which to apply interventions, although Guiffrida suggested that anxiety acts as a catalyst and pushes students to change. Hawley (2006) reported that using reflective teams when implementing Guiffrida's model results in student growth and awareness. In addition, when using reflective teams, students are free to look at interventions that seem natural and they are not restricted by what is taught. Even though Guiffrida's concerns are noteworthy, Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) stated that once professional practice takes place, students usually do what comes naturally, regardless of their training.

Another recent model is the skilled counselor-training model, which was developed to teach counseling skills and promote student cognitive growth and development (Little et al., 2005). The skilled counselor-training model is effective for increasing skills development, self-monitoring, and cognitive development (Little et al., 2005). Little et al. reported that, when using the model, the best way to relieve student anxiety is to focus on the acquisition of skills. Balleweg (1990) reported that anxiety is a significant stressor that could impede a student's ability to remember significant information presented by a client and cause the student to leave out critical information. In contrast to Balleweg, but similar to Guiffrida (2005), Little et al. (2005) found that some anxiety is positive. The authors stated that counselor educators by creating a certain amount of anxiety could use these opportunities as teaching moments and not let anxiety be seen solely as a discourager.

The most recent counseling model, developed by Dollarhide et al. (2007), was coined transparent counseling pedagogy. In their study, Dollarhide et al. divided students in a counseling theories class into small groups of three to four students. Students engaged in a 5-week ongoing role-playing activity with the instructor and co-instructor in the client-therapist role. After each role-play, groups were instructed to discuss the next intervention in the role-play and offer ideas and rationales for their ideas. Students were also instructed to use the most appropriate intervention and provide supporting evidence. Using their model, Dollarhide et al. reported that, overall, students were satisfied with the process because of the collaboration among students, which the authors believed increased student confidence.

**Advantages and disadvantages of pedagogical counseling models.** Although pedagogical counseling models are effective for teaching beginning counseling skills, Rabinowitz (1997) reported that these models are not without flaws. Weiss (1986) described the difficulty of teaching counseling skills to beginning students when there is a lack of potential clients to participate in real counseling situations. He reported that students in beginning skill classes might not always be willing to role-play the part of the client. Balleweg (1990) commented that, because students would be required to discuss their personal concerns and problems, they should not be the clients in real counseling settings. He also suggested that one way to overcome the lack of a clinical population when training students is to have beginning students solicit their own clients outside of the classroom. Weiss (1986) realized the difficulty in finding and soliciting clients who are appropriate for a classroom setting. For example, clients should not be friends of the students or younger than the age of 18. Clients should also be willing to make the time investment required for counseling sessions. An alternative is to have students participate in simulated role-play. A disadvantage with this approach is that such

activities can be artificial. Balleweg (1990) also criticized the traditional method of teaching counseling skills through role-play and stated that students feel engulfed in the process of keeping track of multiple themes that emerge during sessions. Feedback given during role-play activities allows for immediate feedback to students in the group. A weakness is that those not in the group might make the same errors, yet not receive the feedback.

One technique that addresses the limitation of small student groups is Balleweg's (1990) teaching technique that includes a panel of 10 students who act as the therapist. Using this teaching technique, each student on the panel is assigned a specific counseling skill. The instructor assumes the role of the client and each student interviews the instructor (i.e., the client) for 10 to 15 minutes using his or her assigned counseling skill. Following each time segment, the instructor provides feedback and asks the other nine students on the panel as well as the remaining class members to provide feedback. The transition from one student acting as the therapist to the next is usually a 10 to 15 minute segment, a major indicator that a switch is necessary. The student is also an important indicator of a switch. For example, once a student reaches a stalemate in the session, the next student assumes the role of therapist. According to Balleweg, the transition to another student reduces the anxiety of the performing student. To make the transition positive and keep a natural flow in the session, the instructor seeks feedback from the student panel and then proceeds to the next student.

Balleweg (1990) suggested that his approach reduces student anxiety and promotes authenticity of sessions because of the role-play by the instructor as the client. His approach also provides an excellent forum for immediate feedback from multiple sources as opposed to the traditional dyad or triad. Another advantage of Balleweg's approach is that students report a greater sense of direction in class. Differing perspectives are also brought to the attention of all



students for consideration and evaluation, which promotes vicarious learning and cohesion among students. Balleweg noted disadvantages of his teaching approach concern larger student groups and the occurrence of lengthy individual practice sessions within a class. Rabinowitz (1997) offset the limitation of time by extending the role-play from one session to continuous sessions over the course of a semester. In doing so, he increased student learning potential by affording students the opportunity to see the therapeutic change as the client progressed. A disadvantage to offsetting the time limitation is that students feel a lack of support from their peers because of possible differences in their individual counseling approaches. For example, students reported that, in these situations, peers were less than supportive, more judgmental, and did not allow room for mistakes (Rabinowitz, 1997). Students also reported intolerance of their own performance, as evidenced by personal criticism and wanting to be correct.

Despite the effectiveness of the teaching models for basic counseling skills, which include experiential exercises, skill demonstrations, and supportive environments, a percentage of students continue to have problems grasping basic counseling skills (McAuliffe & Lovell, 2006). For example, McAuliffe and Lovell (2006) analyzed themes (e.g., skills of attending, listening, paraphrasing, reflecting, and questioning) based on student counseling sessions at the halfway point of a microskills course. Their findings supported a departure from rote demonstration of counseling skills, or modernistic pedagogy, to a developmental approach. When counseling skills were presented initially, students were in a dualistic, right or wrong, developmental stage of learning. The authors concluded that, when teaching skills, the focus should be on moving students toward a higher level of cognitive complexity by assessing students' developmental positions and developing appropriate teaching strategies to foster student progression of skill abilities.

## **Developmental Models**

A developmental model for teaching counseling skills allows for the progression of student learning over time from what students know to a more complex way of thinking and managing information (Granello, 2002). King (2009) described that development progresses from a cognitive beginning, in terms of understanding skills, to a reorganization of those same skills and cognitions. A higher level of understanding and functioning follows this reorganization. What students know in the beginning changes over time based on experiences and the meanings students give to those experiences. Granello (2010) described student development as a process of observing experiences, thinking about experiences, and combining experiences with current knowledge through a lens to view experiences. Elder and Paul (1994) noted that individuals (e.g., counseling students) who demonstrate higher-order cognitions tend to be more inquisitive, questioning, and open to new knowledge as information is received.

In agreement with most developmental models, Perry's (1970) scheme is a developmental model of learning that is dependent on how students experience their world and how they filter their physical, emotional, and mental experiences. Knowledge is based on student perceptions rather than the information provided or the facts presented. Further, student learning occurs through processing responses to what is heard, which is more meaningful than content alone. As such, student processing becomes the vehicle of learning and, subsequently, has a greater impact on learning. How students approach a topic usually indicates the ease with which new information is accepted and is evidence of how students progress from simple to complex thinking.

Perry (1970) described the process of cognitive development and the organization and evaluation of information as a progression through nine positions characterized on a continuum.

The nine positions have been condensed into four cognitive structures that each represent a point on a continuum of understanding. The point in structure where students fall indicates the level that knowledge is interpreted. As students become more complex in their cognitive processes, they advance along the continuum. Structure 1 is dualistic thinking and includes basic duality (position one) and full duality (position two). Structure 2 is multiplistic thinking and includes early multiplicity (position three) and late multiplicity (position four). Structure 3 is relativistic thinking and includes contextual relativism (position five) and precommitment (position six). Finally, Structure 4 is commitment and includes making a commitment (position seven), challenges to commitment (position eight), and post-commitment (position nine).

Perry (1970) described the dualistic thinking structure as a point where students depict a world of absolutes with a definitive right or wrong way of thinking. In basic duality, students view knowledge as absolute; instructors have all the right answers and should not be questioned. Students realizing that differences among authorities exist characterize full duality; however, these differences are still rejected in favor of a right or wrong answer. McAuliffe and Lovell (2006) agreed that students in the dualistic structure look to the authority figure for answers. Students are more concerned about surface-level information and are mechanical in their use of counseling skills. They do not give much thought to the process of counseling and do not probe for deeper meaning in their role-play sessions. Ivey and Goncalves (1987) also noted that students in a beginning skills class tend to categorize their work as right or wrong. In a qualitative research study with videotaped instruction, Keats (2007) demonstrated this right or wrong phenomenon. When shown a session of a trained counselor in practice, students were critical of the counselor's responses because the responses did not fit into what students were taught. For example, if the counselor did not demonstrate empathy, students deemed that the

counselor was wrong because they had been taught that counselors must always be empathetic. Keats' findings of right or wrong thinking are consistent with Perry's position of basic dualistic thinking. Granello and Hazler (1998) suggested that faculty push students because, as Perry (1970) suggested, students run the risk of becoming passive at the dualistic structure. Such passivity occurs because students in the dualistic structure expect instructors to provide the answers rather than require students to perform what they perceive as meaningless tasks that facilitate independent thinking to arrive at correct answers (Kloss, 1994). Kloss also reported that students in the dualistic structure expected correct answers and refused to recognize fellow classmates as possible sources for answers. These findings are indicative of full dualistic thinking (position two). Students in the full dualistic thinking position acknowledge alternatives, yet still reject these alternatives in favor of the authority. In the dualistic structure, students are stuck in familiarity and are described as angry in terms of how they view knowledge. In these situations, Kloss suggested that instructors provide more support to promote learning. To facilitate student development, students need to be encouraged to question existing truths (Perry, 1970).

As the search for correct answers continues, students' confusion and anxiety also increases as they move from dualistic to multiplistic thinking (structure two) and into position three, early multiplistic (Perry, 1970). During early multiplistic thinking, students accept that there is a right answer, a wrong answer, and unknown answers. The uncertainty realized in position three evolves into the belief that answers may never be known and everyone has a right to their opinion. This new realization results in students entering position four, late multiplicity. Simpson et al. (1986) suggested that instructors should push students into the second structure, multiplistic thinking, by informing students there is no right or wrong answer and that several

correct answers are possible. As students are exposed to new information and become more aware of other opinions, they move into position four, late multiplistic thinking (Perry, 1970). Granello (2002) found that counseling students typically begin training somewhere within structure two. Bruning (2007) noted that, as students are bombarded with information that is contradictory to their belief systems, they are perplexed by the thought that their world has changed. Multiplistic thinking allows for the opinions of others and emphasizes the value of these differing opinions. At this point, students no longer believe in an absolute right or wrong answer and can begin to acknowledge differences in the selection and use of skills. Although multiplistic thinking increases tension, stress, and anxiety (Perry, 1970), Bruning (2007) stated that students should not be given answers, but should be approached with patience and attention and pushed to seek the answers on their own.

In the multiplistic structure, Bruning (2007) described students as being more likely to confront instructors and see authority figures in a positive or negative light when they are challenged. If students' experiences are negative and they assign a negative quality to the authority, the experience will detract from the authority's credibility. As a result, students will begin to think that instructors are judgmental and critical. Granello (2002) characterized Structure 2 as frustrating for students because they perceive experts in the field as not having all the answers. Granello also noted that students believe there is a right answer but it just has not yet been discovered. As students move along the cognitive complexity continuum, they begin to realize that there is no right answer and that, rather several answers could be supported by evidence. Kloss (1994) stated that as the instructor presents multiple opinions and differing ideas, student beliefs in the instructor as the all-knowing guru diminishes. As students propel toward multiplistic thinking, they place less weight on criticisms of their work because they view

multiple decisions as a matter of opinion (Kloss, 1994). In the context of good experiences, students are pushed to Structure 3, relativistic thinking, and begin to validate the legitimacy of differing opinions as supported by reason. Kloss (1994) stated that students calm their tempers when they begin to view instructors as support systems in learning or improving their skills. Kloss also reported that, as students begin to see instructors as facilitators of learning, they turn their attention to other issues, such as the evaluations received. At this point, students may find fault with instructors for not making evaluative guidelines clear. Kloss also stated that during this time, students, although seemingly open to the vagueness of the teaching approach, still do not accept responsibility for their work. Once they begin to argue and consider different alternatives to problem solving, they enter Structure 3, relativistic thinking.

Granello (2002) noted that relativistic thinking involves knowledge that is viewed in the context of the present situation. Within this structure are contextual relativism (position five) and precommitment (position six) (Perry, 1970). With contextual relativism, students see answers to problems as being supported by reason that is relative to the present situation. Precommitment occurs when the student sees a need to make a choice and commit to that decision. During precommitment, students begin to develop their own styles. They make decisions based on an examination of their thought processes and they view the instructor as a consultant (Granello, 2002). McAuliffe and Lovell (2006) stated that counseling students who are in the relativistic thinking structure are more accepting of numerous perspectives, flexible in the application of counseling skills, critical of their own work, understand the ambiguity in counseling, and are willing to explore evidence as opposed to personal beliefs. Granello's (2002) study showed that students seldom reach the relativistic structure. Granello reported little

difference in cognitive complexity between students at the beginning of their program and those at the end of their program.

Kloss (1994) used Perry's scheme in his approach to teaching using subject matter that was purposefully vague and offered multiple viewpoints. He also used a small group work approach to enhance student development from dualism to multiplicity to relativism. Kloss encouraged limited interference from instructors so that students would do the majority of the talking. By allowing students to take the lead and instructors to remain more passive, instructors were seen as less in control. This method also allowed for a free-flow verbal exchange among students. Kloss also stated that students should be held accountable for their ideas by presenting supporting evidence for their actions. In the relativistic structure, instructors are seen as resources to facilitate learning. Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) examined counselor development and found instructors facilitated student movement from reliance on the authority figure (i.e., dualism) to a reliance on their own internal states. These findings are indicative of relativistic thinking.

The final structure, commitment, is the combination of knowledge and experience into an integrated whole to make a commitment to knowledge (Perry, 1970). Within positions seven, eight, and nine, students make commitments, experience consequences and challenge of their commitments, and realize that commitments are ever changing. Granello described students in this structure as making ethical and moral decisions that guide their lives based on experiences, knowledge, and values.

**Advantages and disadvantages of developmental models.** Several articles on developmental teaching models in counselor education exist. The majority of research has focused on student acquisition of skills (Duys & Hedstrom, 2000) or supervision of students

(Granello, 2000). Choate and Granello (2006) stated that developmental teaching is viewed as important and that models are needed to address the design and implementation of training programs. Granello and Hazler (1998) suggested that developmental teaching benefits counselor education programs by providing the opportunity to understand students at each level of development. Advantages to counseling programs exist in the form of structuring classrooms, teaching strategies, and developing a curriculum that addresses students' developmental needs. A developmental teaching model also provides students with learning situations that enhance their cognitive complexities as defined in Perry's (1970) scheme of cognitive development.

Eriksen and McAuliffe (2006) reported that one added advantage to using a developmental approach is that professors can observe students as they change, evolve, and become open to learning interventions. A developmental approach also can be used as a vehicle to promote growth, enhance effectiveness, increase communication, facilitate tolerance, encourage confidence, and decrease levels of anxiety and ambiguity. Granello (2002) stated that a developmental approach could also assist professors in the evaluation process by identifying students who may require additional support or instruction and enhance student movement to higher-order cognition. Granello also stated that developmental models assist instructors in knowing where students are developmentally, although instructors should never lose sight of where students need to be or could be in their learning process. Eriksen and McAuliffe (2006) agreed that a developmental approach allowed professors to identify and observe student characteristics, such as the extent to which students are dogmatic, conformist, or rigid. The authors cautioned that a developmental approach should not be seen as a way to weed students out of a program or class but rather as a method to promote development and growth. According to Granello and Hazler (1998) developmental approaches, if incorporated into the teaching



format, offer the opportunity to present information systematically and complementary to teaching methods and student learning styles.

Kreiser, Ham, Wiggers, and Feldstein (1991) noted that an important method to analyze a teaching model is with a family metaphor. The authors compared counseling students to children who need the attention, support, and care. As students begin to develop their cognitive skills, less support and care is needed. Kreiser et al. compared this process to that of a parent who allows more anonymity as the child grows. Eventually, students, who were once novice learners, take on the role of parent and become up-and-coming counselors-in-training. Another teaching method that supports the incorporation of a developmental model is “professional infancy” (Bruss & Kopala, 1993, p. 685). According to this developmental model, students are dependent, but growth is still toward autonomy within an environment that is supportive and conducive to productivity.

Fong, Borders, Ethington, and Pitts (1997) found small incremental changes in student cognitive development. In their study, students demonstrated abilities for more complex counseling skills; yet, exhibited no improvement in their abilities to see a client objectively or conceptualize a client until after field placement. Eriksen (2008) noted that some developmental models might be seen as gender-biased against women and lacking in ability to address the developmental needs of minorities. One disadvantage specific to Perry’s (1970) scheme of development is seen in its original development and validation in the 1950s and 1960s. Individuals’ meaning-making and understanding at that time was influenced by the context of historical events, such as the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement. Bruning (2007) supported Perry’s work and believed that teaching should be tailor-made to students and based according to the structure of development that students occupy.

## **Counseling Students' Concerns**

Numerous studies on counselor training have been conducted to assess the presence of student anxiety before, during, and after training and the influence anxiety has on students' abilities to be effective counselors (Jordan & Kelly, 2004; Levitt & Jacques, 2005; Woodside et al., 2007). The authors found student anxiety to be useful, harmful, or have no bearing at all. According to Schauer et al. (1985), counseling students experience a great amount of anxiety in the classroom and this anxiety impacts learning. The authors also noted that the environment could be an important source of trainee anxiety. Urbani et al. (2002) proposed that the creation of a structured environment to induce a therapeutic amount of anxiety could facilitate change within students. A supportive environment, coupled with the creation of anxiety, pushes students to focus. For example, Auxier et al. (2003) conducted a qualitative study on counselor development during training and found that students expected a typical educational experience (i.e., lectures, tests, and traditional papers) when they entered the classroom. As students progress in their counseling programs and learning becomes experiential, the comfort of what is known evolves to increased anxiety levels. Students also face the emotional challenges of new learning experiences and become more aware of their own intrapersonal behaviors. Additionally, students learn how to receive feedback regarding their counseling performance, which could also increase anxiety, especially because of the ambiguity of experiential teaching methods (Levitt & Jacques, 2005).

In addition to anxiety, students face a process that, at times, seems vague and mysterious, thus their levels of frustration increase. Levitt and Jacques (2005) noted that, in students'

attempts to master basic counseling skills, they continuously practice skills, lose sight of the client, and are faced with the dilemma that their abilities influence the therapeutic relationship. Because the therapeutic relationship is viewed as significant to the counseling process, losing sight of a client can increase student frustration and place the counseling relationship in jeopardy. Wheeler and D'Andrea (2004) noted that beginning counseling students cling to the spoken word of a client in an attempt to assist that client, but, in the process, students miss important parts of the client's story. As students attempt to bridge the gap between skills attainment and being present, frustration levels increase.

Jordan and Kelly (2004) found that beginning counselors worry more about their ability to perform and less about the therapeutic relationship in terms of harming a client or committing an ethical violation. The authors reported that of 23 students, 22% worried about competence, 13.8% worried about effectiveness, and 3.7% worried about the client-counselor relationship. Stewart (1995) maintained that motivation, academic performance, and navigating a newfound identity as graduate students impacted student learning. He maintained that students' feelings of isolation, dependence, scrutiny, and being overwhelmed prevailed. Isolation increases as students enter a learning process that is unlike any other they have experienced. For example, unlike many undergraduate programs, graduate programs typically do not offer social networking opportunities. Adult learners are usually involved in work, marriage, and children, which leaves little room for socialization and increases feelings of isolation. Stewart noted that students are concerned with an increase in responsibilities and demands such as deadlines, projects, and other assignments. These added responsibilities often lead to an overall decrease in autonomy and concerns with being scrutinized. Instead of periodic reviews through written exams, as in undergraduate programs, students in graduate counseling programs are under review

from professors in the form of observations during class participation, role-plays, supervision assignments, and feedback from faculty and peers.

Auxier et al. (2003) stated that students enter counseling programs with attitudes of excitement at the prospect of learning new information. As they progress, their excitement turns to doubt over ever-increasing feedback. According to Neufeldt, Karno, and Nelson (1996) students who reflect during the feedback process and examine the exchange of dialogue to better understand the process are not seen as avoiding responsibility. Neufeldt et al. also noted that for student reflections to be beneficial, they should be conducted intentionally. Griffith and Frieden (2000) suggested that student reflective thinking within a supportive atmosphere encourages growth and decreases feelings of loss, disorientation, and anxiety.

Feedback is another student concern. Auxier et al. (2003) found that students who received feedback from peers, instructors, or clients viewed the feedback as evaluative and as either confirming or disconfirming. Confirming feedback was well received and validated students' self-impressions although, disconfirming feedback promoted suspicion in students. According to Auxier et al., feedback is a comparison against self-perceptions and students decide to either accept or reject the feedback. Reflective exercises allow time for students to consider feedback, compare it to self-perceptions, and decide what to do with the feedback received. Fitzpatrick, Kovalak, and Weaver (2010) found that the process students use to choose their theoretical orientations is based on the feedback received from instructors. Students may not convey their reservations to instructors; rather, they opt to share their concerns with fellow students. One possible reason for students' hesitations to share concerns with instructors is their perceptions of instructors' power in the evaluative process (Gross, 2005). Gross stated that instructors should consider students' perceived power imbalances and address the student-

instructor relationship by mending any breeches or discord as they occur. He also suggested that instructors allow time for student reflection in the educational exchange to facilitate discussion of students' beliefs and values.

In a group counseling exercise, students' reactions to feedback were viewed as overwhelming, threatening, awkward, and emotional (Hollihan & Reid, 1994). Conversely, feedback afforded students vicarious learning experiences as they gained an understanding that actual client experiences could be just as overwhelming and fearful for clients as they were for students. Students also noted that they understood that counseling involves being a good listener as well as being able to respond to what was heard (Hollihan & Reid, 1994). Folkes-Skinner (2010) assessed training methods in group work and their impact on counseling skills development. Findings revealed that students believed group work was helpful in terms of personal growth issues, supportive feedback, and role-play. Role-play in group activities, as described by students, afforded them the opportunity to practice and increased their abilities to demonstrate skills (Folkes-Skinner, 2010). Folkes-Skinner also identified that sharing experiences between students and professors was important because students reported meaningful learning experiences that enabled them to understand the process of counseling. Furr and Carroll (2003) addressed critical incidents in student learning that influenced student journeys to becoming counselors. Findings suggested that students learned best through experiential learning. By participating in didactic role-plays (eventually real-plays), students learned to take risks and trust was enhanced. What students identified as unhelpful in group activities was the negative quality assigned to groups, which was described as exposing personally emotional matters (Folkes-Skinner, 2010). Students also reported feeling dismissed or ignored during group activities. Even in didactic role-plays, when the acting counselor was

not listening, students reported the experience as positive because it emphasized the importance of listening (Furr & Carroll, 2003).

From an overall student perspective, other concerns included class or program structure (Hollihan & Reid, 1994). Hollihan and Reid discovered that students disliked required activities, such as article critiques and studying for quizzes because they believed their time could be better used practicing counseling skills or focusing on other issues related to the counseling process. An additional student concern was the content of the coursework that focused on research related activities, rather than practical applications of counseling. Finally, students reported concerns related to personal problems, such as demanding workloads, focus on grades, and little direction from instructors regarding assignments.

Woodside et al. (2007) explored the student process of becoming a counselor and identified several themes that impacted their development as counselors. One theme, boundaries, involved the balance between students' professional identities as counselors and private individuals. A subtheme that emerged was finding a balance between self and others. Students realized the need to establish reasonable, safe, and permissible ways to respond to others in their new roles. One student remarked, "So see I am not a psychologist...but my family thinks I should know what is wrong with [my sister]" (Woodside et al., 2007, p. 24). A second subtheme was students' concerns about finding a balance between work and home. To satisfy this concern, one solution was to assume a school counselor position that would afford them the opportunity to balance home, career, and family, within the confines of the educational system. Another emerging theme was successfully navigating newfound identities. Students identified intrapersonal changes such as values, responsibilities, and expectations that were relative to family, friends, peers, instructors, and even clients. Students were also concerned

with the application of classroom material to real world experiences, whereas in undergraduate school, this was not a concern.

### **Psychological Safety and Ethical Concerns**

Furr and Carroll (2003) stated that experiential learning and ethical dilemmas presented in counseling programs have an emotional influence on students. One such dilemma is related to student personal growth that occurs when role-plays, real-plays, journals, and reflection papers are used as teaching methods in counseling programs. During students' tenures in counseling programs, personal growth evolves and personal changes occur in their interpersonal relationships with family, friends, and peers. Furr and Carroll (2003) found that 84 master's level students, enrolled in a 60-hour CACREP-accredited program, experienced complex analytical or exploratory levels of communication that increased the possibility of conflict in their interpersonal relationships. The authors further stated that counseling students' levels or styles of communication changed during their learning experiences and dramatically influenced how they communicated with others. Findings suggested that, as students acquire new communication styles, significant others may not make similar communication changes. This discrepancy in communication styles could result in interpersonal difficulties in these relationships. Counselor educators are faced with facilitating change in students; however, becoming involved in students' personal lives could create ethical dilemmas.

Another concern is that some counseling students have personal issues that they need to resolve through counseling (Furr & Carroll, 2003). Auxier et al. (2003) noted that external evaluations by professors and peers encourage constant self-reflections of attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs. Because personal journals and reflection papers are instructional tools that are used in evaluations, the authors cautioned that counselor educators should be vigilant regarding

problematic behaviors that students describe. The authors also noted that as students are challenged to evaluate self-perceptions, anxiety levels increase, especially in the face of disconfirming evaluations. Although anxiety levels increase, self-awareness is an important ingredient in learning about the counseling dynamic and students need to be cognizant of the conflicts they may experience related to their values, beliefs, and feelings (Cook, 1999). Barnett (2007) agreed that self-awareness of personal issues (e.g., loss experiences, intimacy issues, and narcissistic behaviors) is one reason some students enter the counseling profession. Because counselor educators are privy to students' personal issues, a tactful and diplomatic approach is required in broaching these topics with students, especially related to those students who receive counseling. As Furr and Carroll (2003) noted, this is especially the case when students perceive referrals to personal counseling as a weakness. Because students are fearful of professors' perceptions and their evaluative power, students may elect not to receive counseling. As noted by one student, it was an "emotional roller coaster of learning about myself and dealing with personal garbage...it was more fear-producing...It was uncomfortable" (Auxier et al., 2003, p. 33).

Professors should also consider the art of counseling itself. Furr and Carroll (2003) stated that students expect to learn theory and content related to counseling. They are not prepared for the level of self-disclosure and personal exploration required by many counseling programs. Sommers-Flanagan and Means (1987) found that up to 25% of students, when participating in role-plays as the client, had some sort of psychopathology. Folkes-Skinner (2010) observed that, during role-plays, students experience an increased awareness of emotional exposure. Even though this exposure may cast a negative light on role-plays, which is required in most counseling programs, Weiss (1986) suggested that beginning counselors should practice



on real people (real-plays) as the best possible scenario. Because of students' lack of preparedness for self-exploration, counselor educators are faced with the challenge to encourage and promote a supportive and warm environment that fosters professional development, but at the same time demand a specific level of training that is required to become proficient in the counseling field. Furr and Carroll (2003) suggested one way to remedy this ethical issue is to create an atmosphere that includes discussions about personal examinations as they are translated into personal growth. Woodside et al. (2007) also supported personal disclosure as a concern. In their study, students cited self-discovery and personal or professional boundaries as an area of concern in terms of learning to become counselors.

### **Summary**

Movement from modernism to constructivism pedagogy typically has been relegated to the field of general education and only recently has encompassed the field of counselor education. Counselor education has evolved from the traditional modernistic approach to a constructivist approach with experiential strategies as key components in counselor education. Counseling pedagogy is seen in the form of teaching models that incorporate experientially based models, such as Kegan's interpersonal process recall training model, Ivey's microskills model, and, more recently, the skilled counselor training model (Little et al., 2005). In recent years, developmental teaching approaches have viewed students as developing toward professional maturation, counselor identity, and cognitive complexity (Jennings & Skovholt, 1999; McAuliffe & Lovell, 2006; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992).

Several teaching models address students' learning experiences in beginning skills classes. Dollarhide et al. (2007) developed a counseling teaching model, TCP, and reported an overall increase in self-confidence in student's abilities to exhibit counseling skills. Guiffrida's

(2005) emergent model affords students the opportunity to act naturally without the expectations of regurgitating facts, which reduces anxiety. McAuliffe and Lovell (2006) acknowledged current models to be effective and they also reported that a percentage of students continue to struggle with basic counseling skills. Other researchers have reported student concerns such as ambiguity, anxiety, self-doubt, and performance, as overriding themes (Auxier et al., 2003; Folkes-Skinner, 2010; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Jordan & Kelly, 2004; Levitt & Jacques, 2005; Stewart, 1995; Woodside et al., 2007). Student psychological safety and ethical concerns are additional issues that present as potential teaching dilemmas.

## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

This chapter provides a discussion of the methodology for my research. In this chapter, I examine the rationale for conducting a phenomenological qualitative research study and discuss the research design in the following sections: (a) phenomenological research, (b) role of the researcher, (c) selection of students, (d) selection of sites, (e) research validity, (e) data collection procedures, (f) research questions, and (g) data analysis procedures.

In the counseling field, an abundance of literature has addressed beginning counselor anxiety, self-efficacy, and fear in the classroom (Al-Darmaki, 2004; Barnes, 2004; Schrader, 2004). Researchers have also explored pedagogical methods regarding counseling student training such as the interpersonal process recall training model by Kegan (as cited in Daniels, 1994), the microskills model (Ivey, 1994), the emergent model (Guiffrida, 2005), and the skilled counselor training model (Little et al., 2005). Limited qualitative research has addressed students' personal experiences in beginning counseling skills classes. The purpose of my study was to examine the phenomenon of students' lived experiences in beginning skills classes.

#### **Phenomenological Research**

Phenomenological roots are grounded in the philosophical underpinnings of Edmund Husserl. Consciousness and intentionality are central to a phenomenological method of inquiry (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology is defined as how a person experiences and processes an event in his or her thoughts, perceptions, and actions. According to Creswell (2003) phenomenological research is a method of inquiry about the lived experiences of individual students. There are two types of phenomenology, hermeneutic and psychological. In hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher focuses on a description of the event and the

interpretation derived from that description (van Manen, 1990). The researcher interprets, or develops, meaning from what is experienced. In contrast, psychological phenomenology is less concerned with interpreting and more focused on describing the experience (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). One advantage of psychological phenomenology is that the researcher perceives the phenomenon from the vantage point of the participant.

Psychological phenomenology shares common elements with other phenomenological approaches. The uniqueness of this methodology comes from data collection methods and analysis. In my study, psychological phenomenology lends itself to developing a deeper insight into counseling students' learning experiences in beginning skills courses. According to McAuliffe and Lovell (2006), students have difficulty grasping counseling concepts, such as basic counseling skills, even in an experiential learning environment. However, minimal qualitative research has explored counseling students' perceptions of their experiences in beginning skills classes. A psychological phenomenology approach for my study allowed me to focus on the descriptions of counseling students' experiences through the interview process and the text of interview transcriptions. As Creswell (2007) noted, descriptions of experiences are rooted in how students process information in the context of their surroundings.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I began my counseling career in 1985, when I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Social Work from the University of Louisiana at Monroe (formerly Northeast Louisiana University). In 2000, I earned a Master of Education from the University of Louisiana at Monroe, where I was first exposed to counseling pedagogy in terms of how skills are taught and how individuals are trained to become counselors. When I began training for a Doctorate in Counselor Education, my interest in pedagogy increased substantially. My curiosity was further piqued when I served

as a teaching assistant for my doctoral educational requirements and as I performed coaching duties and supervised master's level students who were enrolled in the University of New Orleans (UNO) counseling program.

My experience in learning counseling skills, both as a social worker and a counselor-in-training, was a large motivator for my study. Because of my experiences, I have a unique perspective on how counseling skills should be taught and how students learn these skills. As I moved into each role of coach, supervisor, and teaching assistant, I noticed a pattern of behaviors among master's level counseling students related to their competency levels and self-efficacy in their use and demonstration of counseling skills. As I questioned students regarding their experiences, it seemed that they were not grasping the concepts presented, at least in their demonstrations of counseling skills. I often wondered if students were truly learning the skills and the implications of using these skills with clients or if they were simply demonstrating rote behaviors to earn a grade and pass a class. I also wondered how students perceived their counseling skills classes from a developmental approach for teaching counseling skills as opposed to a more directive approach.

Auxier et al. (2003) noted that students expect traditional academic methods of instruction that consist of lectures and writing papers. With the movement from traditional to experiential methods, which are typical of counselor training programs, students become more anxious. The move from what is perceived as comfortable to uncomfortable (i.e., traditional approach to an experiential approach) increases self-doubt and lowers self-confidence. As such, I began to question the methods used to teach counseling skills and the obligations of counselor educators to ensure that students demonstrate, retain, and understand these skills. I was also

curious about the thought processes of students' learning experiences and I began to consider the instructor's role as I posed the following questions:

1. Do instructional techniques and methods used hinder or encourage counseling students' skills attainment?
2. Do instructional techniques and methods foster student learning?
3. When implementing a particular teaching method, do instructors consider how each student learns differently?

As mentioned, I also questioned whether students comprehended the theoretical rationale for using a particular skill or simply demonstrated a defined skill set as part of a class requirement. In reviewing my subjective reflections, I noted a connection between my biases and my research questions. My biases are as follows:

1. I believe master's level counseling students enter the counseling profession without a clear understanding of the emotional and cognitive involvement necessary for their educational experiences.
2. I believe performance anxiety interferes with students' true skills demonstration.
3. I believe students learn rote skills demonstration rather than grasp the full meaning or use of actual counseling skills.
4. I believe current pedagogical models are outdated.
5. I believe students need more direction from their instructors in a beginning skills class.

### **Selection of Participants**

Approval to conduct my study was obtained from the University of New Orleans (UNO) Institutional Review Board (IRB, see Appendix A). The application for IRB approval included

the following: (a) description of the study, (b) description of data collection, (c) funding required, (d) risks to students, (e) informed consent, and (f) confidentiality agreement.

My study explored nine counseling students' lived experiences in a beginning counseling skills course. According to Creswell (2007), sampling should be purpose-driven. Students were master's level counseling students who attended universities with counseling programs that offered a beginning counseling skills class, had a vested interest in my research topic, and could offer valuable input into the nature of their experiences. For a phenomenological approach, Creswell suggested criterion sampling, a procedure that works well when all persons involved in the sample experience the same event. As such, three criteria were used for student inclusion. First, master's level counseling students who participated in my study were registered in a 3-credit-hour, full-semester beginning skills class in a counseling program. Second, counseling students had no prior experience in a counseling skills class or community service work that provided basic counseling skills. Third, counseling students had no more than one absence from their beginning skills class over the course of the semester that they participated in my study.

I recruited nine counseling students by contacting the department chairpersons of the three universities via an introduction letter (see Appendix B). I placed a follow-up phone call to the department chairperson of each university to confirm receipt of the introduction letter. During the phone call, I asked permission from each department chairperson to contact the professor of record for the beginning skills class at the respective university. I also offered to meet with each department chairperson, if requested, to discuss my research, or to discuss the study via phone. After I obtained permission from the department chairperson at each university, I contacted the professors of record for the counseling skills courses, provided an overview of the study, and requested permission to attend his or her beginning counseling skills class to speak to

possible student participants. Once I obtained permission from the all three professors, I attended each beginning skills class the second week of the semester and distributed the request for student participation form (see Appendix C). The request form provided a brief description of the study and requirements for participation.

I requested that all student participation forms be returned to me after class. I separated those willing to participate in the study from those who elected not to participate. Participation forms of those not willing to participate were destroyed. Three willing students from each university who met the inclusion criteria were contacted via their personal contact information that week to confirm their participation, answer any questions that remained, and arrange to distribute a journal to each student. Students were contacted throughout the semester to monitor and track participation and address any potential problems that arose. Arrangements were made for the first interview with each of the nine students selected for the research. Interviews took place within the two weeks before the end of the semester. I retrieved the journals during these interviews. Each student selected a pseudonym to protect his or her identity and all other identifying information was changed to protect confidentiality. Follow-up interviews were conducted after the semester ended and the interviews were transcribed.

A student standby list was generated. I obtained permission from students who met the inclusionary criteria and volunteered to participate, but who were not selected for interviews, to be placed on the standby list in the event that one of the nine students was not fully available. Each student from the standby list was required to record weekly journal entries and follow the same protocols as the original nine students. These students were not interviewed unless one of the original nine students was not available at the appropriate time. The original nine students remained in the study throughout the semester and the standby students were not needed. As an



incentive to journal, all students who submitted a journal at the end of the semester were given a chance to win an iPad via a random drawing.

Students were asked to sign an informed consent form at the beginning of the first interview (see Appendix D). The informed consent included the following: (a) purpose, description, risks, and benefits of the study; (b) confidentiality statement; (c) data collection procedures; (d) withdrawal procedures; (e) post interview follow-up information; and (f) my contact information, university faculty contact information, and UNO IRB information.

### **Selection of Sites**

Creswell (2008) stated that the site for data collection in a qualitative study is as important as the selection of students. Intentional site selection can also help the researcher understand the phenomena being researched. My study included students from three counseling education programs. The universities chosen were from the southern part of the United States. The instructor of each beginning counseling skills class held a Doctorate in Counselor Education and Supervision or its equivalent and had a minimum of two years of experience teaching a beginning counseling skills class.

### **Research Validity**

Creswell (2003) stated that the assessment of validity should be ongoing throughout the research. He described several methods to assess study validity and ensure some degree of accuracy. Validity is the researcher's best attempt to present an accurate account of what is discovered and is supported by students' assessments of interview transcriptions (Creswell, 2007). Creswell also suggested that no particular validation procedure is best with a given method of inquiry. Because validation strategies are not specifically designed according to the method of inquiry, I selected five strategies that I consider best for my research approach: (a)

clarification of bias, (b) member checking, (c) triangulation, (d) debriefing, and (e) external audit.

According to Creswell (2003) clarification of bias is defined as commenting on one's biases that may influence the method of inquiry and interpretation of results. In the process of my reflection on the research topic and my personal experiences, I considered my biases and their influence on the study findings. A discussion of my biases is included in the composite narrative of my study. The second strategy I used to increase study validity was member checking. According to Creswell (2007), member checking allows students to review transcripts or a preliminary report of interpretations and is one of the most valuable forms of validation. Member checking occurred during follow-up interviews as these follow-ups allowed time for each student to review his or her interview transcript.

The third validation method was triangulation, which is the process by which multiple data sources are analyzed to confirm or corroborate the findings of other data sources (Creswell, 2007). Creswell described triangulation as a process of collecting and building information to provide a justification for themes developed in a study. For my research, I reviewed meaning units developed from three sources of data: (1) interview transcripts, (2) student journals, and (3) course syllabi. Fourth, because my biases are substantial, I used a peer debriefing process. Peer debriefing is a process by which an ongoing critique of the research occurs to enhance credibility (Spillett, 2003). I used a debriefer to monitor my subjectivity and personal reflections, thereby minimized any impact on the study's outcomes. Finally, I used an external auditor to review the accuracy of resulting themes, meaning units, and conclusions based on the textural, structural, and composite descriptions from students' interviews, journals, and syllabi. The external auditor was a qualitative researcher with Doctorate in Counselor Education and Supervision and

expertise in phenomenological research. The auditor signed a confidentiality statement (see Appendix E). As recommended by Creswell (2007) the auditor had no connection to my research study.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Creswell (2007) stated that the quality of good research is dependent on multiple forms of data collection. Data collection included nine in-depth interviews, nine documented personal experiences of counseling as recorded in students' journals, and three course syllabi (one from each university site).

### **Interviews**

According to Creswell (2007) and Kvale and Brinkman (2009), the primary process for collecting in-depth information in a phenomenological study is to use interviews from the participants' perspectives. Lester (1999) noted that interviews emphasize the importance of what students know about their experiences and how they interpret the act or phenomenon being studied. Interviews are purposeful and can be structured or unstructured, employ open or closed-ended questions, and occur as a one-time event or multiple events. Interviews seek not simply the answers to a question but also an understanding from the students' perspectives (Seidman, 1998). For my study, data collection included semi-structured interviews that followed an interview protocol (see Appendix F) with nine students. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes.

Initial interviews occurred near the end of the semester, two weeks prior to the last official class date, and were conducted at a mutually convenient time and location that offered privacy. At the beginning of the interviews, I explained to each student that all verbal interactions would be digitally recorded. Each student received a copy of the informed consent

(see Appendix D). Follow-up interviews were conducted after transcription of initial interviews and served as a method of data confirmation. During follow-up interviews, I presented students with the originally gathered information in the form of transcripts (Creswell, 2003) and allowed students to confirm accuracy or suggest needed changes to the transcripts. Any changes made by the students to the transcripts were noted in the margin of the transcripts prior to data analysis.

### **Journals**

The second method of data collection was students' weekly reflective journals, which included their experiences in a beginning counseling skills class. According to Creswell (2007), documents such as journals are a good source to obtain data. He found that the researcher should address the level of comfort students have with journaling. Creswell suggested that the researcher give students specific instructions on what information should be included in their journals and guidance on writing legibly. For my study, I provided students with journals and instructions for writing in the journals were listed in the request for student participation form (see Appendix C) and were discussed with students at the beginning of the semester. Journals reflected students' perspectives of their experiences in the beginning counseling skills class as well as any other experiences relevant to their learning counseling skills. Journals were collected during the interviews two weeks before the end of the semester and were then transcribed and analyzed. A professional transcriptionist was used and was required to sign the confidentiality statement (see Appendix E). Following data analysis, journals were returned, or, if a student could not be located, the journal was destroyed.

### **Documents**

Creswell (2007) proposed that documents are artifacts that contribute to understanding the expressions and experiences of students. Edmonson and Irby (2008) stated that documents

vary from personal to formal records and may include items such as self-report documents or formal records of students' environments. Documents may provide insight into students' lived experiences within the classroom environment. For my study, documents were excellent sources of support and were used to confirm information from interviews. I also secured syllabi from each counseling skills classes from a student or professor to use as a source document. Each class syllabus provided an overview of the beginning skill courses in terms of the required readings, textbooks, and pedagogical model used by instructors. Class syllabi also provided valuable information regarding attendance, participation, and class requirements, all of which impact student learning experiences. I contacted the professors of each skills class for any information that was not included in these documents.

To link interviews to journals and syllabi, I coded all data sources. The first code, number 1, was assigned to the first student interview transcription, journal, and syllabus. The second code, number 2, was assigned to the second student interview transcription, journal, and syllabus. This procedure was used for all nine students. Transcriptions, journals, and syllabi were collected at the first interview to ensure all data sources received the correct codes.

### **Research Questions**

Qualitative research questions are open-ended, exploratory, changing, and concerned with a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). According to Creswell (2007), two types of questions should be posed: a central research question and research sub-questions. The central research question, the question of inquiry, guides the study of the phenomenon. I also used issue-oriented research sub-questions, which were posed in such a way that the central question was broken into parts (Creswell, 2007). Issue-oriented questions allow for scrutiny and afford deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

For my study, the central research question was as follows: How do counseling students perceive their lived experiences in their beginning skills class? The following research sub-questions were used to explore the central research question:

1. How do counseling students perceive their lived experiences regarding the teaching methods used in a beginning skills class?
2. How do counseling students describe their expectations prior to entering a beginning skills class?
3. What factors do counseling students perceive as helpful when learning counseling skills during their beginning skills class?
4. What factors do counseling students perceive as hindrances when learning counseling skills in their beginning skills class?
5. What personal experiences impact counseling students' learning counseling skills?

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Moustakas (1994) described a significant and structured six-step method for phenomenological data analysis. The first step is to reflect on one's biases at the beginning of the study, also known as bracketing or epoche. During the reflection process, any preconceived notions relevant to the phenomenon under study are set aside, which allows the researcher to approach the phenomenon with a new outlook that is free from previously held assumptions. I reviewed my biases listed earlier and developed a narrative of these biases prior to reading the transcribed interviews. Bringing my biases into my present awareness allowed me to make a conscious effort not to impose any meaning other than what the students expressed when recalling their experiences. Although Moustakas acknowledged that epoche could not be

achieved fully, simply being aware of and reflecting on one's biases places the researcher in a more open state to see or experience what is there.

After achieving a higher level of awareness of my biases, the second step consisted of developing a list of relevant statements for each transcript, journal, and course syllabus. According to Creswell (2007), relevant statements are developed based on individual experiences in a process called horizontalization. Each transcript, journal, and course syllabus was read verbatim and I looked for statements that directly related to the lived experiences of students in beginning counseling skills classes. I then listed all relevant statements. Any statements that were not relevant were discarded and any overlapping, repetitive, or vague statements were not repeated.

Once all relevant statements were listed, the third step consisted of assigning a formulated meaning to the list of statements from each data source into meaning units (Creswell, 2007). Meaning units are a researcher's interpretation of what the relevant statements mean. Once all meaning units were developed, the fourth step included arranging related meaning units into clusters. The meaning units resulted in themes that were non-repetitive and non-overlapping.

The fifth step was to write textual and structural descriptions of each identified theme that answered the three research sub-questions. According to Creswell (2007), textual descriptions reveal what students experience and should include cited examples. After textual descriptions were written, structural descriptions were written. Structural descriptions describe how students' experiences occurred (Creswell, 2007). It is within the structural descriptions that the setting and the context of the phenomenon are described. Omizo, Omizo, and Okamoto (1998) noted that

structural descriptions involve a process of describing events and conditions, as in my study, and are relative to being a student in a class.

In the sixth step, I integrated the textural and structural descriptions for each theme into a composite description. In the composite description, the central research question was answered. It is within the confines of this composite narrative, the shared essences of students' experiences were captured. Using the data analysis steps outlined by Moustakas (1994), the illustration below conceptualizes the data analysis process I used (see Figure 1). However, as Moustakas (1994) stated, the essence will never be completely captured and is ever changing, as experiences are different for each person.



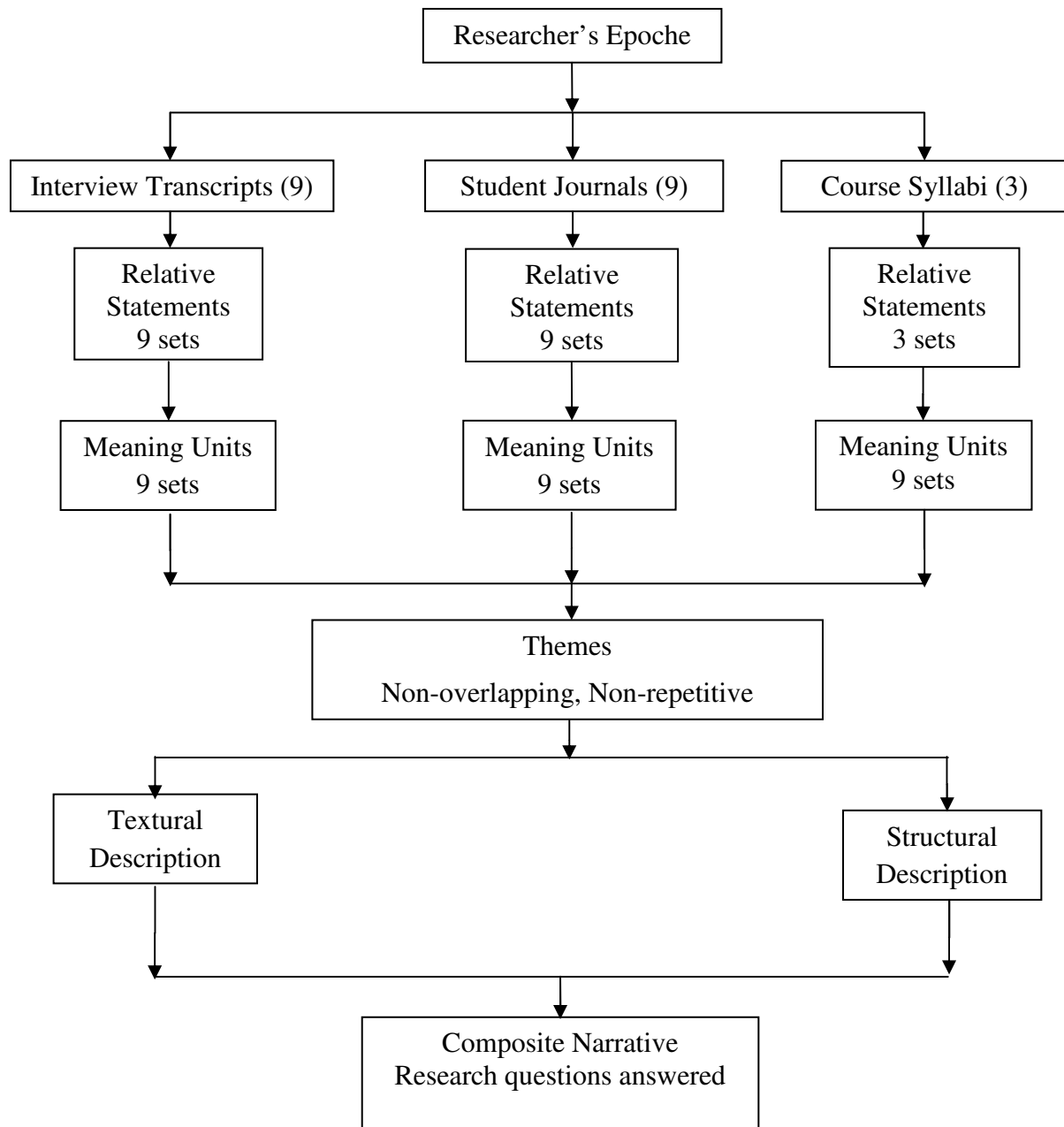


Figure 1. Data analysis procedure based on Moustakas' (1994) model.

## **Summary**

I recruited nine students from beginning counseling skills classes to participate in interviews and journaling to gain insight into students' lived experiences as they learned counseling skills. I implemented a psychological phenomenological design that allowed me to explore how students experienced and processed their beginning counseling classes. Research validity was determined via: (a) clarification of bias, (b) member checking, (c) triangulation, (d) debriefing, and (e) external audit. Finally, data analysis consisted of the six-step method described by Moustakas (1994).

## **Chapter IV**

### **Results**

The purpose of this study was to research the lived experiences of master's level counseling students in a beginning skills class. Chapter four includes five sections. Section one provides an introduction and section two includes the student demographics. Section three contains the methods and results. In section four, the results are linked to the research questions. Each research question includes a textural and structural description which allows for a detailed explanation. A composite description of common experiences of all students is provided to answer the central question. In section five, a summary of the chapter is provided.

#### **Student Demographics**

I used criterion sampling as the method to select nine master's level counseling students registered in a 3-credit-hour beginning counseling skills class at three universities in the southern part of the United States (see Table 1). Students had no prior experience in a counseling skills class or community service work that provided beginning counseling skills. Students had no more than one absence from their beginning skills class over the course of the fall semester. Students were contacted throughout the semester to monitor and track participation and address any potential problems. Nine students were selected from three universities. Six students from two universities were female. The third university had two female students and one male student. Eight of the students ranged in age from 22 to 25 and one student was 50 years old. All students were Caucasian. To protect identities, pseudonyms were chosen for each student. Two instructors were females and one instructor was male.

Table 1

*Student Demographics*

Student	Age	Race	Gender	Bachelor Degree	Graduation Year	Instructor Gender
Betty	23	Caucasian	Female	Psychology	2012	Male
Jean	22	Caucasian	Female	Psychology	2012	Female
Susan	22	Caucasian	Female	Psychology	2012	Female
Beth	24	Caucasian	Female	Psychology	2010	Female
Hazel	24	Caucasian	Female	Psychology	2011	Female
Zach	22	Caucasian	Male	Sociology	2012	Female
Sherri	25	Caucasian	Female	Psychology	2010	Male
Paige	50	Caucasian	Female	Psychology	2012	Female
Kris	24	Caucasian	Female	Family Consumer Science	2010	Female

**Method and Results**

The method of inquiry was psychological phenomenology, which lent itself to developing deeper insights into students' experiences in the beginning counseling skills class. In reporting results of this study, I used students' words to reflect their experiences as much as possible. Creswell (2007) stated that quality research depends on multiple forms of data collection. My data collection sources included nine in-depth student interviews, students' journals of their personal experiences, and course syllabi (i.e., one from each university). Data sources covered a 4-month period (i.e., fall semester). Interviews were approximately 45 to 60 minutes and were digitally recorded and transcribed. In follow-up interviews, I presented the individual transcriptions of the initial interviews to each student for member checking. Interview transcripts, journals, and course syllabi were analyzed using a modified version of Moustakas' (1994) structured method for phenomenological data analysis.

Before analyzing the data, I read all transcripts, journals, and course syllabi to gain a deeper understanding of students' learning experiences. As I read each data source, I developed 177 relative statements to the phenomenon under study. Vague, repetitive, or non-relative statements from the list of 177 were discarded, which reduced the list to 44 relative statements. The 44 relevant statements were reduced to the following eight non-repetitive and non-overlapping manageable chunks of data called meaning units: (1) prior to entering the beginning skills class, students experienced a variety of feelings regarding the uncertainty of the class format, (2) students felt learning beginning counseling skills was a developmental process in terms of skill acquisition, (3) students had different feelings regarding lectures and were influenced by the format used by instructors, (4) teaching interventions used by instructors caused varying emotions among students that impacted their learning beginning counseling skills, (5) integration of students' personality traits enhanced learning beginning counseling skills, (6) personal experiences outside of the classroom impacted student learning of beginning counseling skills, (7) class length and class schedules impacted student learning of beginning counseling skills, and (8) diversity among students in the class offered the opportunity to experience a variety of perspectives that impacted learning beginning counseling skills. The following four themes were derived from the eight meaning units: (1) developmental progression, (2) instructional methodology, (3) personal reactions, and (4) pre-defined structures (see Table 2).

Using the epoch process described by Moustakas (1994), allowed me to reflect on my biases and set aside any preconceived notions relevant to the phenomenon under study. After each interview and through the analysis of the data, I discussed with my debriefer my experience to monitor my subjectivity and minimize the impact of my personal biases on the study's

outcomes. At times, I found the interviews to be challenging and having the debriefer allowed me to discuss my frustration and anxiety. After some interviews, I felt perhaps the interview did not go as well as I had intended and I was concerned that I was not getting the full experience from the student. As a result, I felt anxious. Processing these feelings with the debriefer allowed me to reconcile my feelings and accept the process as it proceeded.

I also used an external auditor with no connection to the study to review the accuracy of meaning units, themes, and conclusions based on the textural, structural, and composite descriptions from all three data sources. I also provided the external auditor copies of the source documents (i.e. transcripts, journals, syllabi) for my data collection. Once the auditor read the documents, I met with him to discuss the accuracy of the meaning units, themes, and conclusions. We discussed the analysis method and I clarified the meaning of textural and structural descriptions. He shared with me the method of his own data analysis, which was similar to mine. Based on my work and his own personal experience, he agreed with my findings.

## **Themes**

### **Theme One: Developmental Progression**

Auxier et al. (2003) found that students expected typical educational experiences (i.e., lectures, tests, and traditional papers) when they entered the classroom. For theme one, developmental progression, students described their experiences in class at the beginning and end of the semester. Theme one included the following meaning units: (a) meaning unit one, prior to entering the beginning skills class, students experienced a variety of feelings regarding the uncertainty of the class format and (b) meaning unit two, students felt learning beginning counseling skills was a developmental process in terms of skill acquisition.

**Meaning unit one: Prior to entering the beginning skills class, students experienced a variety of feelings regarding the uncertainty of the class format.** Seven of the nine students (Kris, Paige, Sherri, Hazel, Susan, Jean, and Betty) experienced anxiety regarding the beginning counseling skills class, whereas the remaining two (Zach and Beth) expressed other feelings. Kris and Paige expressed similar experiences regarding anxiety about the class. Paige explained, “I knew that as part of the class I would be expected to do videotaping of my skills...I think it’s performance anxiety. But, I also think there is an element there of I don’t feel prepared.”

Similarly, Sherri said, “I mean I had anxiety about it, but I didn’t know what to expect really.” Hazel had been in the program for two previous semesters. Although she knew the class required role-plays, she still expected the class to have the lecture style format as other classes; however, she was “nervous” as indicated in her journal. Hazel stated that she was nervous before coming to class because, “It wasn’t coming in and sitting down for 45 minutes and being talked at.” The course syllabus Hazel had was indicative of what she expected concerning role-plays, participation, and reflections of her journey, which is not typical of a regular lecture format in classrooms.

Susan and Jean shared a similar experience, described by Susan as feeling “pressured...there’s so much you just have to learn.” Jean reported that she expected to be “a little nervous” and felt “overwhelmed when handed the syllabus.” The syllabus that Jean had outlined required assignments, which included role-plays. Betty did not have any feelings of nervousness or anxiety; however, she stated that her first day in class was “nerve-wracking” in that she had to do a counseling demonstration. Zach expressed “excitement” at the prospect of taking a beginning skills class. Beth simply said, “I knew we would be learning basic techniques and everything...but I didn’t expect us to get as far as we did in one semester.”

**Meaning unit two: Students felt learning beginning counseling skills was a developmental process in terms of skill acquisition.** All nine students (Kris, Paige, Sherri, Susan, Zach, Hazel, Beth, Jean, and Betty) had expectations regarding skills acquisition by the end of the course. Three students, Kris, Paige, and Sherri, felt they would be adequately prepared by the end of the course and shared a similar experience, as described by Sherri when she said, “I believed by the time I finished the course, I would be able to demonstrate all of the skills well.” In contrast, the remaining six students (Zach, Hazel, Beth, Susan, Jean, and Betty) felt there was more to learn after the beginning skills class. Zach felt there were more skills to learn because there was an advanced techniques course. He stated, “here’s all the things you need and then advanced is bring’em back here’s more depth and why you’re using it.”

Hazel felt she would not be ready to start counseling a real client but she noted she felt she was “definitely on my way.” As written in her journal, she also felt validated when reinforced by the instructor and wrote, “It is an ongoing process and we are constantly learning to be better counselors.” Beth did not expect to have advanced as “rapidly” over the course of the semester after reading the course syllabus. The course syllabus Beth used was 15 pages in length and described required assignments in and outside of the classroom. Susan said she thought she would be “halfway” in terms of her skill set by the end of the class. Jean said she did not feel she would be where she should be “completely” and said she would like “another semester of techniques before I get to practicum.” Betty shared a similar concern when she said, “I’m not gonna say that I think I’m 100% ready to go out into the world and counsel now, but, I do think that I’m 100% better than when I started.”

## **Theme Two: Instructional Methodology**



Most pedagogical models rely on cognitively based instructional methods such as lectures and written tests. McAuliffe and Eriksen (1999) stated within the world of counselor education, two teaching theories exist, modernism and constructivism. For theme two, instructional methodology, students described teaching strategies and interventions that impacted their learning. Theme two included the following meaning units: (a) meaning unit three, students' feelings about lectures varied and were influenced by the format used by the instructor and (b) meaning unit four, teaching interventions used by the instructor caused varying emotions among students that impacted their learning beginning counseling skills.

**Meaning unit three: Students' feelings about lectures varied and were influenced by the format used by the instructor.** Seven of nine students (Paige, Hazel, Jean, Sherri, Zach, Beth, and Betty) commented about the lectures in their beginning skills class. Paige felt there was value in the lectures, but they also took away from practice time. She felt some things covered in the lecture she could do "independently through reading" to allow for more practice time during class. Hazel felt that lecture time was poorly spent going over "the rubric," although she liked the rubric and knowing what was expected of her. Hazel's course rubric required two verbatim transcripts that counted for 50% of her grade.

Jean described the amount of information conveyed in lectures as "a ton of information thrown at me at once" and lectures were her "least favorite" teaching strategy. Jean also felt that the professor's preparation was important to the quality of the lecture. For Jean, the syllabus seemed to play a part in her perception of preparation for class and said, "the professor should have her own [syllabus] rather than someone else' which did not follow the [current] professor's teaching format."

Sherri said, “I just don’t see the point of a lecture.” Sherri also felt that she was, “learning more, probably, from my coach.” Sherri and Zach felt the professor’s demeanor in class influenced the lecture. Sherri reported, “She’s warm and nice...you don’t go into her class nervous that she’s gonna call on you or anything like that.” Zach agreed with Sherri and wrote in his journal, “The professor’s relaxed demeanor and presentation of the syllabus allowed me to be more confident in my ability to progress in this course.” In Zach’s class, the course syllabus consisted of 15 pages and all assignments were clearly outlined.

Beth noted she would “like to observe a real session” and just listen to a lecture. Betty felt that the professor should provide professional demonstrations as part of the lecture as indicated in her comment, “maybe even just once before we started class...pick a random student...and say okay, I’m going to counsel you for five minutes and show you all how you should do it.”

Four of the students (Zach, Beth, Susan, and Hazel) mentioned PowerPoint presentations as a lecture component. Zach, Beth, and Susan described the same experience of PowerPoint being helpful when the instructor enhanced the presentations with additional information rather than reading them verbatim. Susan describe this when she stated that the instructor “actually has her own examples and experiences that she would sometimes incorporate with what she was talking about.” Hazel felt PowerPoint presentations alone were beneficial in the sense that they were “something tangible to have in front of you...it served to familiarize myself again with what I’m supposed to be doing.”

Beth and Zach commented on the use of textbooks as part of the lecture. Beth felt that incorporating the textbook exercises into the lecture was beneficial. Specifically, Beth described the textbook exercises as “helpful because then you would go into role-play with a little bit more

knowledge of what you were doing.” In contrast, Zach found the textbook somewhat boring and did not care for some of the language used, as he noted in his journal:

The book was a little too touchy feely. I didn’t like that the author used the word helper. As a future counselor, the word helper makes it seem lesser in some way. If counselors were referred to as helpers, I might not have even decided to become one.

Four of the students (Paige, Susan, Hazel, and Sherri) liked instructor demonstrations and interactions and described this method as helping them by allowing them to observe how the skill should be executed. Paige stated seeing the “Skills performed rather than just reading them from the book or in a slide presentation was helpful.” Paige appreciated the demonstrations, but wrote in her journal that it was “not as helpful as when we actually practice them in class.” Susan wrote in her journal that she was impressed when the instructor “started with a ten minute demonstration of what she would like to see us be able to do” and successfully demonstrated the skill. Hazel wrote in her journal, “It’s not even the content...but learning personal stories/situations from the professor. That is how I have found I have learned so much in this program already.” Sherri suggested other “activities, such as professional demonstrations, either by the professor or with videos or vignettes” would be helpful.

Two of the students, Hazel and Susan, spoke about class discussions. Hazel felt class discussions, as a teaching strategy, were not beneficial initially; however, as the semester progressed, she really began to see the benefit: “At first it was very confusing for me...I’m here to learn from the professor...but then, as we progressed...I realized getting the vantage points of other people was important.” On the same topic, Susan said, “I think that you need to engage to get the best experience in the classroom...I think that it’s good to hear other people’s opinions.”

Of the nine students, six (Kris, Paige, Susan, Jean, and Hazel) mentioned the use of technology during class. These students felt that videos provided an effective means to teach counseling skills. All three instructors required videotaped sessions as part of students' learning experiences. Kris described her experience as, "The very first day of class ...we were videotaped...just for us to see how it would be ...to have a starting point on how to grade us." She felt that videotaping was useful because it allowed her to evaluate her performance and demonstrate a progression in her skill level throughout the semester. Even though Paige agreed that tapes were useful, she felt it was a poor mechanism by which to be graded. Specifically, taped skill demonstrations used for grading did not provide ample time to demonstrate all skills and they were "anxiety producing because I knew it could impact my grade." Susan wrote in her journal that tapes were,

EXTREMELY stressful—and the anticipation up until the point is intense—having the video is one of the best tools I can use to better myself. I know that somewhere down the road I will look back on this first video and see how far I have gone!

Jean wrote in her journal, "In my video, I appeared calm and confident despite the nerves and anxiety I felt.... I realized that I had a basic understanding of the skills I've learned and can put them into practice." Hazel felt that "taped sessions could have added to practice time and offered more authenticity." When using other types of technology such as online discussion boards, Paige felt they were not beneficial, took away from practice time, and when class was canceled was not an adequate substitute for in class learning.

**Meaning unit four: Teaching interventions used by instructors caused varying emotions among students that impacted their learning beginning counseling skills.** Three of the nine students, Betty, Kris, and Hazel, appreciated experiential learning. Betty reported she

felt experiential activities were beneficial. She stated, “I like to learn by practicing.” Kris said, “experiential learning has a really big impact.” Hazel agreed; however, because of the lack of time to practice skills, she felt rushed and “people were always getting gypped of time or gypped of feedback.”

Eight of the nine students reflected about the fishbowl technique when learning skills. Paige, Sherri, Zach, Hazel, and Susan felt that fishbowls caused anxiety and impacted their performance, but the experience improved with the passage of time. Paige described fishbowl experiences as “very anxiety producing” when “the entire class is watching you role-play.” Although Paige felt these experiences were anxiety producing, she still felt they were “beneficial.” Sherri said, “Oh God, I would freak out because I would feel judged.” Zach also remarked feeling pressured. “Oh, I have to do this skill, so let’s get there now because she [instructor] is watching me.” Hazel remembered “everybody staring at you...just sitting there writing, looking at you and it’s awful.” Hazel did say that counseling labs were a better experience and they “made a huge difference” in the improved comfort level of students. Susan said, “At first, oh my God, my heart was beating out of my chest...but as classes went on, I found a lot of benefits in it.”

Kris had a very different opinion of the fishbowl experience. She reported no anxiety and saw the fishbowl as a way for her to improve her skill set by observing. She liked the fishbowl because she “got to see what everyone else was doing, and pull from what I liked or didn’t like to adjust my style.” Jean also reported liking the fishbowl experience because, as she noted, “I feel like I got more feedback from the fishbowl because you had the students also give you feedback.” Betty liked the fishbowl “because at first, like the first couple of classes I got stuck...I just wouldn’t know where to go and [instructor] would tell me.”

Two students, Susan and Jean, felt that triads as a teaching intervention aided student learning. Jean believed triads offered “real-time feedback.” Susan thought triads made her experience more “personal, I don’t know if it had to do with the nerves or what, but I just think that it was more realistic.” Five of the nine students (Paige, Hazel, Zach, Beth, and Kris) saw value in practicing in dyads, but expressed different opinions concerning the details. Paige felt it was easier during skills demonstrations to have the same client in the dyads each week. She said, “I feel more comfortable because I sort of know what she’s gonna start talking about because it’s been kind of the theme that’s continued since the beginning.” Hazel said dyads provided the chance to build relationships and allowed for more “consistency in feedback.” Zach liked “having different clients initially,” but his feelings changed as the semester progressed and noted, “when you start doing ending skills, it would definitely benefit to have the same person for an extended period of time.”

Beth, Paige, and Hazel were concerned about switching clients each week, but for different reasons. Beth liked changing clients because “we got to see different personalities.” Paige felt that it was “difficult to switch roles between counselor and client.” Hazel reported, “When I need to practice this skill as counselor I feel like I get off track because I am thinking about personal issues and then I have to go back and be counselor.” Kris liked being the client and offered her perspective in her journal, “I am starting to enjoy being the client because I like seeing different counseling styles. I also like knowing how it feels as we proceed to have counseling. I also like getting problems off my chest...like free counseling.”

Five of the nine students (Sherri, Zach, Hazel, Betty, and Paige) discussed real-plays and the challenges and benefits associated with this activity. Sherri felt that real-plays were better compared to role-plays and said, “it was awkward, but felt that real-plays were the most

beneficial.” Zach preferred real-plays because “you want your client to have a real problem.”

Hazel, Betty, Sherri and Paige expressed concerns with safety and risk. Hazel described the experience as “guarded...it was a little nerve-wracking because I don’t know these people.”

Betty thought real-plays were good and liked “ground rules,” but she expressed concern over the real-plays when she said

I had one girl talk about the death of her mom, and that was a shock for me just because I didn’t think I was ready to handle it and I think that’s the only real problem with using real life situations in your life, is you might throw out something that you’re not ready to admit to yourself, but I mean it’s part of the territory.”

Betty felt that real-plays were good, but liked when there were “ground rules and when the professor told the class, you know what you would be able to handle as a counselor right now, so don’t give anybody something outlandish.” Sherri felt that real-plays could be a potential risk when classmates revealed personal information and expressed her concern as “I don’t want to strike a nerve just because we’re classmates, and...get too real with her because I don’t want to make her uncomfortable.” Paige described her real-plays as the client when she wrote in her journal that she was going places she “had not intended” and described her experience as embarrassing and uncomfortable after expressing “that much emotion in front of all my peers.”

In contrast to the real-play exercises, students were also required to engage in role-plays. Three of the nine students (Jean, Paige, and Hazel) expressed their dissatisfaction with role-plays. Jean found role-plays to be “contrived.” Paige had trouble with role-plays because as the client she noted that she had to “make up the story as I went. And it sounded ludicrous.” Hazel described her dislike of role-plays in her journal, “My client was discussing a semi-real/semi-

made up issue so I am a little confused. I wish she had gone with a completely real issue because she admitted during the feedback period she didn't want to confuse her story."

Six of the nine students (Kris, Paige, Sherri, Susan, Jean, and Betty) found transcriptions of their counseling sessions to be useful as another teaching method and only Zach disagreed. Kris liked transcribing, because it was an "outside activity...just you and another person...you're able to be more relaxed and kind of just let it go." Paige concurred with Kris in her statement, "I have more time to think about and process what I'm talking about." Sherri described transcription as, "time consuming and a pain in the ...but, I mean, it helps you see what you did wrong and what you need to work on." Susan shared a similar experience in her journal:

Although this was time consuming, I feel that it was very effective...the assignment asked to create an alternate response for each counselor response. This was effective as well because it called for me to really dissect the session. Overall, this was one of the most helpful assignments in the course.

Jean said transcripts offered a way "to look back" because, "When you're in the session and you're done...it's a blur." Betty wrote in her journal that it was an "excellent assignment...to be able to listen to the session and actually hear what I was telling the client made me stop and realize where I needed to get better." Zach did not like the transcript activity when he noted, "I don't need the transcript. I can watch a tape and get everything I need to know." Zach also reported, "on the syllabus it said, you're transcribing, I already dreaded the day that I was gonna have to transcribe." Zach's course syllabus required two transcriptions that comprised 50% of his grade.



All students felt that feedback was critical and useful as a tool for learning, though there were differences in the methods they preferred. Paige reported that feedback was good; however, she explained how it was given was also important,

Last night, after I finished my role-play, I felt like she [instructor] kind of called me out and held me up in front of the class...it was a positive thing. But, it made me uncomfortable...it made me feel like the other students may view me like I was being a favorite or something like that.

Paige also reported that feedback from other students was valuable, but depended on the context in which it was offered. She stated, "I would listen to it, and I would see if there was any merit to what they were saying." Paige also felt that feedback should be given to the instructor in terms of teaching style. She noted that the instructor listened and adjusted "her teaching to what will help." In contrast, Susan reported her feedback to the instructor was not well received and once she gave feedback, "I kind of felt wrong for doing that. I just wanted to comment to make sure that I wasn't wrong and [instructor] got upset about it. I kind of felt kind of dumb." Sherri and Kris stated that the feedback was good but both felt it should be given in a supportive manner as Kris said, "I guess we always try to be positive to each other, so that we feel good." Zach liked feedback, but had difficulty with forms that the instructor used and stated "we didn't understand how to fill it out [feedback form] partly it was because we didn't understand the language. The form just wasn't explained to us very well." Hazel wanted to hear more feedback from the instructor. She noted, "I felt like I wasn't getting enough from the teacher. I wanted to know what her thoughts were because she's the experienced professional." Beth said that the feedback was "good" and "all the other students never gave negative feedback. If anything, it

was questions, like “Oh, when she said that, should she have said this?” Susan wrote in her journal that the feedback was good but expressed concern over receiving feedback,

We discussed the issues and strengths behind giving and receiving feedback. I never really realized how that aspect of the program could potentially be an issue throughout my counseling journey. I explained how growing up as the youngest child had an effect on how I react to feedback in present time. In retroflection, I felt like I was an easy target for humiliation. I feel that ever since I was young, I have felt like I had to defend myself. She [professor] said something along the lines of, who is the person that you are hearing in your mind? This made me turn my attention towards another part of my life that was an extremely rough one. During this time, I was constantly defending myself and only ended up strengthening the guards I had already put up so sturdily. By becoming aware and recognizing this downfall, I have realized that I need to start shifting towards embracing a new, different state of mind.

Jean said the following about feedback: “I was nervous about that during the first class, but toward the end, I really enjoyed it just because a lot of the students, they weren’t very critical. It was more like a support-type thing.” Betty explained that, early in the program, only the instructor gave feedback, but she would have liked to hear feedback “from others.” Betty also felt that written feedback from the instructor was good because he made comments such as, “Okay, this is a good response,” as opposed to “Oh, good try. Better luck next time.” Sherri did not care for the written feedback sheets and wrote in her journal, “The check off sheet really gets under all of our skin. It is like this looming cloud over everyone’s head because we feel pressured to hit every point or not within each session.” Kris wrote in her journal that she liked “feedback that helps me figure out if that is a successful technique for the type of person I am.”

Susan wrote in her journal, “Although I have not had the best experiences receiving feedback, I realize that it is time to look at it, both positive and negative instead of becoming defensive when I hear something that might be contrary to my belief.”

### **Theme Three: Personal Reactions**

According to McAuliffe and Lovell (2006), exploratory research of students’ personal experiences and challenges when learning counseling skills could be useful to advance counseling pedagogy. Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) found counseling students tended to focus on skills demonstration and restricted personal characteristics (e.g., humor). For theme three, personal reactions, students described how their personal experiences and personality traits influenced learning. Theme three included the following two meaning units: (a) meaning unit five, integration of the students’ personality traits enhanced their learning beginning counseling skills and (b) meaning unit six, personal experiences outside of the classroom impacted student learning of beginning counseling skills.

**Meaning unit five: Integration of students’ personality traits enhanced learning beginning counseling skills.** Three of the nine students (Paige, Kris, and Hazel) felt personal characteristics influenced their experiences. Paige reported the personality of the counselor should be encouraged. She stated, “I think you should be who you are as a person, and that should blend with your role as counselor.” Kris felt most of her counseling behaviors in class were driven by her personality and she was encouraged by the instructor when she stated,

I think automatically, I integrate myself into the skills. You can’t totally change yourself to be robotic. Whenever we were being robotic, he would say you need to act more like yourself so the person you are talking to can take you seriously.

Hazel wrote in her journal, “I think as students in this program, we all come thinking we have qualities valuable for this career.”

**Meaning unit six: Personal experiences outside of the classroom impacted student learning of beginning counseling skills.** Two students (Hazel and Sherri) reported concerns with personal experiences. For example, Hazel wrote that she was concerned with “counter transference issues. Personally, I am wondering if a client could remind me of myself from instances when I have been in counseling?” Sherri was concerned about outside events impacting her learning

If something happened to me over the weekend, sometimes it will impact how I’m counseling my client. Either I’m relating to what the client is saying and so I’ll either want to give advice or like say things like I totally understand, that’s happened to me.

#### **Theme Four: Pre-defined Structure**

Collingwood (1971) attributed the loss of students’ skills to an insufficient amount of training time to practice new skills. His findings also suggested that the lack of skills used post-training was a reason that skills diminished. For theme four, pre-defined structures, students described the influence of existing structures and factors over which they had no control, such as lengthy syllabi, time of the class, class length, schedules, and student body. Theme four included two meaning units: (a) meaning unit seven, class length and class schedules impacted students learning of beginning counseling skills and (b) meaning unit eight, diversity among students in the class offered the opportunity to experience a variety of perspectives that impacted students learning beginning counseling skills.

**Meaning unit seven: Class length and class schedules impacted students learning of beginning counseling skills.** Three of the nine students (Beth, Hazel, and Jean) made comments

regarding university syllabi. Beth stated, “It was really long. In the first class she [instructor] asked what people’s fears were and what they thought about the syllabi, and everyone raised their hand...it was too long. It was intimidating.” The course syllabus used in Beth’s class was 15 pages long, very detailed, and clearly outlined assignments and responsibilities. Hazel disagreed and said, “I like to know what is expected of me and how much that is worth. I have a feeling of how I’m doing.” Jean, who also liked the syllabus stated, “I would go by that to complete the assignments.” Hazel and Jean’s course syllabi provided distinct guidelines and class expectations for successful completion.

Six students (Susan, Jean, Hazel, Zach, Sherri, and Paige) expressed concern over time. Susan felt there should be a class between the beginning skills and advanced skills classes stating “You just need more time.” Jean felt that there was “too much importance on getting certain skills in at a certain time. Jean described in her journal, “One area of class that I think could have used some improvement is the amount of class time that we had to practice.” Hazel agreed that the way the class was set up did not allow for adequate practice time and described her practice times as “10 minutes” in which she felt “pressured and rushed.” Zach felt the size of the practice groups was a problem and interfered with his learning due to “time constraint for my group cause we have so many people.” Sherri reported, “it’s 10 minutes a week. It’s not enough.” Paige wrote, “meeting once a week, my fear is that I won’t have enough practice to be proficient in the skills.” Zach concurred with Paige’s thoughts as he wrote in his journal, “Only meeting once a week was already difficult enough, but having two classes in a row cancelled made me nervous.”

Zach and Hazel had the same concerns with how classes were scheduled. As described by Zach, “we’ll end class and have two minutes before the next class, cause they have ’em back to back...that really bothers me.” Susan was disappointed with the class schedule. She stated, ...one of my good friends is about to go in practicum ... I thought that advanced techniques would come maybe not next semester, but at least a semester after that, not during practicum. She’s like, ‘I’m about to go start practicum, and I haven’t practiced anything since techniques class, and that kind of disappointed me.

Hazel was concerned about the physical setting and organization of the class. She wrote in her journal she was “FREEZING...I could hardly pay attention to what was going on.” Hazel also said,

Not only had we not gone over the material we are suppose to use in the sessions, but my group was in total dysfunction. Two weeks ago my group had a new member added on—already causing some grief at how we are going to go about the counseling sessions. Now, I am supposed to be the client twice. We didn’t even have enough time last week for everyone to go, and this week a group member was missing. This is the second week in a row that things have not gone smoothly and I ended up being so frustrated/confused I started crying, not even during my session, but while we were trying to give feedback. I couldn’t keep straight what my ‘role’ was supposed to be. I went from client to counselor, back to client again. I was exhausted trying to figure out what I was supposed to be putting on in a matter of an hour. I felt like I was just trying to get through each real-play and couldn’t even focus on feedback or what techniques I was to use when I was a counselor. That’s when I started crying actually—my doctoral coaches were

asking me for feedback on how it was being the client, and honestly I couldn't even tell you what went on in the session, I felt so out of whack.

**Meaning unit eight: Diversity among students in the class offered the opportunity to experience a variety of perspectives that impacted learning beginning counseling skills.**

Six of the nine students (Kris, Hazel, Susan, Paige, Zach, and Betty) felt that the other students influenced their experiences in class. Kris stated she experienced conflict between one student and the instructor and "I kinda had a bad taste for her [student] ever since then." Kris described that unprofessional student behavior impacted her learning. Specifically, she reported, "Their cell phones going off, or busting out laughing while someone's talking to someone else in the coaching dyad." Hazel agreed with Kris' description of class disruptions when she described, "There is always two or three people that constantly chime in...I don't wanna hear from a student, I wanna hear from the professor."

Hazel also felt that the professor lacked control of the class and should have "corralled" students to allow others to speak. She wrote in her journal, "someone was asking an in-depth question about a specific theory. This is TECHNIQUES class, not theories." On the topic of class make-up, Susan said, "everyone was so different, but there were a couple of people who just didn't get it, and I think that made a good example of what I do not want to ever do." Conversely, Paige and Zach felt a sense of camaraderie with their classmates. Paige described the class setting as "everybody was nervous about saying things in the fishbowl, but I feel like you couldn't have been with a more accepting group of people, and that made me more comfortable." Paige also wrote in her journal that smaller groups created "a greater sense of intimacy" and allowed a deeper personal sharing. Zach wrote in his journal that he was

“relieved” when he got people in his real-play group whom he had “befriended” and he felt that “having them in my real-play group really helped me feel comfortable.”

Betty was the only student who commented on the gender of other students in the class and felt a class of all females may have influenced her learning. She said,

I did do a client for one of my session transcripts that was male, and I found that one to be the hardest, and it was my last one. I thought it was going to be the easiest because I had all this practice, and I found that a male was harder than a woman ‘cause women like to talk and they’ll tell you everything. We didn’t have a single male in that classroom, so we didn’t get to practice. Maybe that might have impacted how we responded.



Table 2

*Themes, Meaning Units and Number of Participant Responses*

Theme	Meaning Unit	Number of Responses
1. Developmental Progression	1. Prior to entering the beginning skills class, students experienced a variety of feelings regarding the uncertainty of the class format.	9
	2. Students believed learning beginning counseling skills was a developmental process in terms of their skill acquisition.	9
2. Instructional Methodology	3. Students' feelings about lectures varied and were influenced by the format used by the instructor.	9
	4. Teaching interventions used by instructors caused varying emotions among students that impacted their learning beginning counseling skills.	9
3. Personal Reactions	5. Integration of students' personality traits enhanced their learning of beginning counseling skills.	3
	6. Personal experiences outside of the classroom impacted students learning of beginning counseling skills.	2
4. Pre-defined Structures	7. Class length and class schedules impacted students learning of beginning counseling skills.	7
	8. Diversity among students in the class offered the opportunity to experience a variety of perspectives that impacted students learning beginning counseling skills.	6

### Research Questions

Qualitative research questions are open-ended, exploratory, changing, and concerned with a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). I used two types of questions for my study. The central research question that guided my study was, How do counseling students perceive their lived experiences in a beginning skills class? The central question included the following four themes: (1) developmental progression, (2) instructional methodology, (3) personal reactions, and (4)

pre-defined structure. I also used five research sub-questions used to separate the central research question into parts, which allowed further exploration of the phenomenon. Creswell (1994) stated that research sub-questions provide a focus for the central research question as the study progresses. Creswell also stated that as data emerge, research sub-questions evolve. For my study, three of the original five research sub-questions focused on similar elements, which were reflected in counseling students' perceptions of their experiences in their beginning skills class: (1) how do counseling students perceive their lived experiences regarding the teaching methods used in a beginning skills class (i.e., research sub-question one), (2) what factors do students perceive as helpful when learning counseling skills during a beginning skills class (i.e., research sub-question three), and (3) what factors do counseling students perceive as a hindrance in learning beginning counseling skills (i.e., research sub-question four). I merged the original research sub-questions one, three, and four into the revised research sub-question one; What factors do counseling students perceived as helpful or hindering when learning counseling skills in a beginning skills class? The revised research sub-question one included two themes; theme two, instructional methodology and theme four, pre-defined structures. Research sub-question two was, How do counseling students describe their expectations prior to entering a beginning skills class? Research sub-question two included theme one, developmental progression. Research sub-question three was, What personal experiences influence counseling students learning counseling skills? Research sub-question three included theme four, personal reactions (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Research Sub-Questions and Themes*

Research Sub-Questions	Theme
1. What factors do counseling students perceive as helpful or a hindering when learning beginning counseling skills during their beginning skills class?	2. Instructional methodology 4. Pre-defined structures
2. How do counseling students describe their expectations prior to entering a beginning skills class?	1. Developmental progression
3. What personal experiences influence counseling students learning counseling skills?	3. Personal reactions

In the following sections, a summary of the themes applicable to each research sub-question is provided along with textural and structural descriptions. According to Creswell (2007), textural descriptions reveal what students experienced and should include the students' words. Structural descriptions describe the context or setting that influenced how students experience a phenomenon. For the central research question, I wrote a composite description. A composite description is "a long paragraph that tells the reader what the students experienced with the phenomenon and how they experienced it (i.e., the context)" (Creswell, 2007, p. 157).

**Research Sub-Question One**

What factors do counseling students perceive as helpful or hindering when learning beginning counseling skills during their beginning skills class? Instructional methodology, theme two, was reflected in students' perceptions of teaching methods used in their beginning skills class. Seven students believed lectures were helpful when learning beginning skills; however, PowerPoint handouts enhanced lectures, counseling demonstrations added to lecture content, more practice time for skills was needed, and instructors' positive demeanor was

important. As the semester progressed, two students viewed class discussions as helpful when hearing other students' perspectives. Six students felt the use of technology (i.e., taped demonstrations of skills) was helpful to show progress and evaluate performance. Students also found that the use of the fishbowls, dyads, and triads were helpful. Seven students agreed that fishbowls allowed for what Betty described as "on demand instruction." Two students found triads aided in learning; as Jean described, they offered "real-time" feedback with a third person. Five students viewed dyads as more intimate and allowed opportunities to build meaningful relationships. Hazel said dyads allowed her listen to a client present a problem and "to see my client through this issue." Five students said real-plays were helpful because they were more authentic. All students found feedback from the instructor as useful and grew to appreciate feedback from other students over the course of the semester.

An instructional method that hindered student learning was articulated when Jean described her experience of the instructor reading "from her notes," which was not "interactive." Paige thought the use of technology, such as discussion boards and videos for grading, "did not allow for adequate skill demonstration." Two students found that switching from the role of counselor to client was emotionally difficult. Additionally, two students felt switching to new clients each week was not helpful. Beth said, when "skills became more advanced," she preferred the same client. Four students expressed concerns over safety and risk when exposing personal issues that they were not ready to handle. Six students found that transcribing taped skills demonstrations was helpful; however, Zach, preferred to "watch videos" of his skills.

Theme four, pre-defined structure, also impacted student learning. Three students described factors that impacted their learning experiences such as the length of the syllabi, duration of the class, scheduled class meeting time, and other students in the class. Beth said the

syllabus was “specific and good, but I think a lot of it was almost threatening, like if you don’t do this, you won’t get that.” Six students felt time was a hindrance in learning beginning skills. Jean noted there was “too much importance on getting certain skills in and demonstrating advanced skills was a problem.” Three students felt that having back-to-back classes on the same day was a hindrance. Hazel said she felt “rushed.” Six students believed that other students impacted their learning negatively and the instructor lacked control of the classroom. Hazel described some class members as “dominating the discussion” and asking questions not related to the class. One student felt the class gender impacted her learning negatively by having all female students, “We didn’t have a single male in that classroom.”

**Textural description.** Students experienced a range of emotions regarding their textural experiences of the instructional methods used by professors. Initially, students felt anxiety, which led to feelings of worrying, uneasiness, and dread after reading the syllabus. One student described her experience in her journal as “EXTREMELY stressful.” Students felt pressed for time to perform, which led to increased feelings of anxiety and uneasiness. Another student felt dread and contemplated dropping the class. In the beginning of the semester, students also described feelings of intimidation, judgment, and rejection. At times, students were concerned with psychological safety when revealing personal information. Specifically, they felt uneasy when receiving personal information from others and felt ill equipped to “handle it.” Students also felt that they were not getting what they needed to be successful in the course, which resulted in feelings of doubt. As the semester progressed, students’ feelings shifted and students begin to value the class and their feelings of guilt and frustration subsided as they began to feel more connected to the instructor and other students and viewed each as being more approachable and accepting.

**Structural description.** Students expected a more traditional class with lectures and tests. As students entered the classroom, the unexpected class format and the intensity of the class caught some students off guard. They viewed class size and time allotted for class as problematic. Students also viewed class scheduling as problematic and viewed the back-to-back class schedule as emotionally and physically draining. Once the class began, students felt that rote demonstration of written material and instructors' attitudes had a negative impact on their learning. Some viewed their instructors as disengaged, scattered, and poorly prepared, which created an atmosphere that was not conducive for learning. Students also experienced negative interactions with fellow classmates whom they viewed as dominating class time, argumentative, and acting as if they knew more than the instructor. One student noted that the gender make-up of the class was a factor that impacted learning. She believed that a class with all females did not afford the opportunity to practice with male clients. As the semester progressed, students shifted in what they viewed as having a negative impact on their learning and they noted the atmosphere of the class changed. One student noted, "we are in this together, all learning, and all not knowing."

### **Research Sub-Question Two**

How do counseling students describe their expectations prior to entering a beginning skills class? Theme one, developmental progression, reflected the students' expectations prior to entering the beginning skills class. Students' expectations were related to a variety of emotions such as stress, pressure, nervousness, anxiety, and excitement regarding the beginning skills class. Kris said, "I heard all kinds of stories about how class would be and how detailed and in-depth it would be and stressful." Three students expected they would be adequately trained, as Kris said, "I would think I would be at a good enough level." Six students stated that they

expected there would be more to learn after the beginning skills class. One student said, “I wouldn’t say I’m ready to go out there and counsel a real client..., but I am definitely on my way.” Three students, although familiar with class requirements, continued to expect the class format to be similar to the traditional lecture style format.

**Textural description.** Students had preconceived notions about the class that led to increased feelings of anxiety, nervousness, stress, and pressure as well as excitement. Three students “heard” stories about “how the class would be” and they continued to have feelings of stress once in the class. One student, although familiar with the class format, described one of her expectations as a feeling of “fear of failure and a fear of not being able to do it.” One student said that she expected that “shyness” would interfere with her learning experience, which produced feelings of anxiety. Another student felt “unprepared” and “overwhelmed and lost” at not knowing what to expect.

**Structural description.** Students had limited perspectives about the intensity and demands related to the structure of the class. After reading the syllabus, one student commented, “I could tell that it was definitely gonna be very thorough and hands-on.” Students also reported that the experiential format of the class contributed to their intensity level, that they were concerned about the “volume of work” and how they would accomplish the work in a semester.

### **Research Sub-Question Three**

What personal experiences influence counseling students learning counseling skills? The theme of personal reactions described how students’ personality traits and experiences influenced their learning of beginning counseling skills. Three students felt encouraged to integrate their personality traits with their counselor self and reported that this integration enhanced their learning beginning counseling skills. One student felt her personality traits

influenced her learning and described her experience as “I think automatically, I integrate myself into the skills. It’s hard to take yourself out of yourself.” Two students felt that personal experiences impacted their learning skills, as when one student said, “if something happened to me over the weekend, it will impact how I’m counseling.”

**Textural description.** Students felt who they are as a person and their personality traits were important when learning beginning counseling skills. When instructors encouraged students to be “themselves,” they felt more at ease with clients. In doing so, students felt more authentic. One student stated that she was “appreciative” that the instructor encouraged who she was as a person. By not acting “robotic,” students felt a bond with their clients. However, students also had a concern that the bond may go beyond the client-counselor relationship and impact their ability to learn beginning counseling skills. Students were concerned that if they shared similar events or stories with a client, their sharing would evoke feelings of sympathy, which would be less effective. Some students’ personal experiences impacted them more emotionally. Death was discussed during one real-play in which the student explained how it was a “shock” to hear such a serious topic and felt that she was not ready to “handle it.”

**Structural description.** Instructors encouraged assimilation of personal attributes with students in the context of the teaching environment. Through teaching strategies and methods, students were encouraged to “be the person they are.” Instructors fostered the use of students’ personal attributes during skill demonstrations through effective teaching interventions, such as feedback and instruction-on-demand. Personal events experienced by the student outside of the classroom impacted students, which at times interfered with their learning. Finally, in-class activities, such as real-plays, created safety concerns for some students and prevented them from learning more advance skills.



## **Central Research Question Composite Description**

The central research question for my study was: How do counseling students perceive their lived experiences in a beginning skills class? At the beginning of the semester, students were filled with a variety of feelings such as anticipation, excitement, worry, and anxiety. Although students were surprised at the volume of information covered over the course of the semester, they were relieved to know the instructor did not expect them to “know it all” by the end of the semester. As one student described, the “pressure was off.” Students did experience some discomfort practicing skills in fishbowls, dyads, and triads. However, over time, feelings of discomfort decreased as they became acclimated to the training environment and teaching interventions. As students grew more comfortable, they attributed their increase in comfort to the demeanor of the instructor. Instructors eager and interested in the subject matter came across as approachable, which students saw as a “supportive” environment. Students also noted feelings of companionship that developed among their peers, which blossomed over the semester and created what the students called “a safety net.” Students were concerned about time allotted for class and some felt there was not an adequate amount of time for skill demonstration during class. Students also felt that instructors placed more emphasis on skills demonstration than learning how to be “with the client.” Some students felt psychological risks with certain teaching interventions; such as real-plays, fishbowl, dyads, and triads. Other factors that contributed to students’ perceived psychological risk were events experienced in their personal lives and their fear of over-identifying with a client during practice sessions. Students also felt class scheduling was problematic. The intensity and emotional demands of the class left students feeling emotionally fatigued, which was compounded by the fact they attended another class immediately following the class. However, students felt they completed the class with a sense of

accomplishment of having successfully navigated the demands and felt confident in what they had learned in terms of skills, but recognized there was more to learn.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided the data analysis and findings of the present study. Six sections were presented, which included the introduction, student demographics, methods, themes, research questions, and summary. Student demographics included age, gender, educational background, and date of graduation. The methods included psychological phenomenology, data sources, data analysis method, and validation measures (i.e., epoche, member checking, peer debriefer, external auditor, and triangulation). Four developed themes were extracted from the eight associated meaning units. A summary of each research question finding with textural and structural descriptions was provided for each of the three revised research sub-questions and associated themes. Finally, a composite description was included based on the central question.

## **Chapter V**

### **Discussion**

In chapter five, I provide a summary of findings, a research discussion, and additional findings. I also include the limitations of my study, implications for counselor educators, and suggestions for future research. I conclude with my personal reflections.

#### **Summary of Findings**

I used a qualitative research method of inquiry termed psychological phenomenology. As suggested by Creswell (2007) and Moustakas (1994) I used psychological phenomenology to focus on describing counseling students' lived experiences in their skills classes. Using criterion sampling, nine master's level counseling students registered in a 3-credit-hour beginning counseling skills class in three counseling programs participated in my study. My data collection sources included in-depth interviews, participant journals, and three course syllabi. Following data collection, I used a modified data analysis method by Moustakas (1994). As I read each data source, I developed a list of 177 relative statements, which was reduced to eight meaning units and finally four themes: (1) developmental progression, (2) instructional methodology, (3) personal reactions, and (4) pre-defined structures. The four themes were used to answer the three research sub-questions that included textural and structural descriptions. I provided a composite description for the central research question.

#### **Research Discussion**

Nelson and Neufeldt (1998) defined pedagogy as the art of teaching and the methods used to teach a subject, which consist of different strategies and techniques. However, the factors or aspects of student learning that establish mastery in the counseling field have yet to be defined (Skovholt & Jennings, 2005). According to McAuliffe and Lovell (2006), regardless of

the training received by master's level counseling students in experiential classrooms, some students continued to be rote in their demonstration of counseling skills and not as person-centered as the authors would have preferred. In the present study, I describe nine students' perceptions of their lived experiences when learning counseling skills in a beginning skills class. The nine students in my study gave voice to their uncertainties and expectations about the skills class, their experiences with various teaching methodologies, and their personal experiences when learning beginning counseling skills.

### **Counseling Pedagogy**

Modernistic pedagogy occurs when the instructor presents objective and reality based knowledge that is framed in rote memorization through the use of tests or performance measures (Guiffrida, 2005, Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998). The task of the instructor is to identify, organize, and present universal truths in a traditional lecture and test format. In contrast, a constructivist perspective views knowledge as a process that blends students' experiences with what they already believe to be true, resulting in their increased knowledge (Richardson, 2003). In the beginning of the semester, counseling students' responses in my study supported a modernistic pedagogy to learning counseling skills. Students liked the use of PowerPoint presentations, lectures, and textbook exercises; indicators typical of a modernistic approach. Their expectations about their beginning skills class also supported Perry's (1970) dualistic structure. When faced with the syllabus at the beginning of the class, counseling students were overwhelmed and concerned with how they would perform basic skills, viewing what they would be required to learn from a right or wrong perspective. During class discussions when faced with new information, students sought correct answers from the instructor, again typical of a modernistic approach and dualistic structure. The reality of their counseling skills class, although typically

structured with an experiential approach to learning, students in my study reported performing through rote demonstrations of counseling skills, especially for graded demonstrations at midterm and the end of the semester. Also during class, students' responses and reactions were based on what the instructor required and wanted of them, akin to Perry's dualism structure. Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) reported similar findings among their students and found that students participated in learning activities and demonstrated skills in such a way as to please their instructors.

As the semester progressed, counseling students in my study embraced constructivism as an accepted teaching format. Students reported that they made a conscious effort to provide the answers they *believed* the instructor wanted, but they were also aware of other possible responses. Students began to understand that there were right answers, wrong answers, and the possibility of different answers to working with various clients in counseling situations. Although students experienced anxiety and doubt in the beginning of the semester, their initial feelings subsided or disappeared. As students began to come to terms with the experiential approach to learning, a marked shift occurred that supported Richardson's (2003) approach to constructivism, which was conducive to students using experiential hands-on activities when learning counseling skills. Students liked and begin to understand the use of experiential activities; such as using videos, real-plays, role-plays, transcripts, fishbowls, and triads to learning counseling skills; which also supported Kim and Lyons' (2003) suggestion that using experiential teaching methods enhance student learning.

Granello (2002) reported students enter counselor training programs somewhere within Perry's multiplistic structure. Although counseling students in my study reported thoughts and reactions that they occupied the dualistic structure at times, they did progress and exhibit

behaviors reminiscent of the multiplistic structure and a more constructivist perspective, especially within the context of feedback. Kloss (1994) reported students in the dualistic structure refuse to recognize fellow classmates as possible sources for answers that result in feelings of anger. Students in my study expressed concerns with feedback, but they were not angry or frustrated. All students in my study wanted feedback regardless of the source and what they did with the feedback was more indicative of multiplicity. Bruning (2007) noted that multiplistic thinking allows for the opinions of others and emphasizes the value of differing opinions, which was expressed by one counseling student in my study when she commented she would listen to the student feedback, weigh what was suggested for value within the context of counseling situation, and either reject or implement the feedback.

Teaching from a constructivism approach focuses on creating an environment conducive to learning (Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998; Richardson, 2003). In the present study, counseling students commented on the learning environment in terms of an instructor's presence and the impact the instructor had on their learning experiences. Folkes-Skinner (2010) suggested sharing experiences between students and the instructor is important. Students reported that as the instructor shared personal examples or stories of counseling experiences, their learning was enhanced. Students' comments also lent support to McAuliffe and Eriksen's (1999) description of the constructivist approach, which involved instructors and students engaging in collaborative relationships to increase student learning. Counseling students in my study felt instructors who presented as warm and inviting augmented their learning experiences. This finding was not in agreement with Bruning (2007) who described students in the multiplistic stage as likely to confront instructors, view instructors in a negative light, or find the instructors as less than credible based on students' experiences with the instructor. In general, students in my study did

not view instructors negatively, but attributed warm and supportive demeanor of instructors as resources of skill knowledge and counseling abilities.

Phillips (2000) described knowledge as being built on personal experiences and the meaning assigned to those experiences. Richardson (2003) also reasoned that learning continues to occur at an individual level even though learning takes place in a social setting, such as a classroom. An additional finding from this study, applicable to counseling pedagogy and the constructivist approach was that all students reported positive and negative experiences within the beginning skills class. Regarding fellow classmates, two students reported positive experiences, whereas eight students reported negative experiences. Students who had negative experiences reported classmates as unprofessional, domineering and disruptive during class, and unbecoming of counselors-in-training. Even though students reported negative experiences, those experiences were also viewed as learning opportunities of what not to do as counselors. Students also used these negative experiences with their peers to become more in tune with their own behaviors as beginning counselors. Additionally, a few students applied a similar view to instructors who were poorly organized, lacked control in the classroom, and modeled ineffective behaviors. Students viewed negative experiences with instructors as counseling skills and behaviors that are not beneficial professionally and approaches they would not use in counseling settings.

### **Counseling Student Concerns**

Numerous teaching models exist on how beginning counseling skills are learned that involve some form of experiential practice (Dollarhide et al., 2007; Guiffrida, 2005; Ivey, 1994; Little et al., 2005). In addition, several studies on counseling teaching models have described the emotional states of beginning counseling students and the impact their emotions have on their

experiences when learning beginning skills (Jordan & Kelly, 2004; Levitt & Jacques, 2005; Woodside et al., 2007). Through descriptions of experiential learning experiences, counseling student responses in this study supported the literature as students described their anxiety, nervousness, stress, and fears when required to participate in experiential exercises during class. Students were concerned with instructor demands at midterm and at the end of the semester in terms of receiving a grade; yet, during normal practice sessions, students reported that they were not as concerned about the instructor, but more focused on learning beginning skills. Additionally, student descriptions of their anxiety supported Kegan's model for teaching counseling skills, referred to as the interpersonal process recall model (as cited in Daniels, 1994). Daniels (1994) reported that the interpersonal process recall model is grounded in the belief that beginning counseling students are not in tune with the counseling session or other contributing factors, such as their anxiety, which students in this study experienced in meeting the demands of the instructor. Hawley (2006) stated counseling students must understand the global context of how skills are applied and the intended purpose of using specific counseling skills; however, as Guiffrida (2005) described in his emergent model, students have higher levels of anxiety when they lack the knowledge base from which to apply interventions. Counseling students in my study supported this literature in their described anxiety and the impact that their anxiety had on their ability to perform skills; however, the explanation of their anxiety was that if they had more time to practice skills during class, they would be more in tune with client issues and would not see the client-counselor relationship as an issue. The skilled counselor-training model described by Little et al. (2005) also acknowledged student anxiety, suggesting the best way to alleviate anxiety is to focus on the acquisition of skills. Student responses supported Little et al.'s model; however, yet again students cited time as a factor that hindered their abilities to focus on skills



acquisition. Student also described feelings of camaraderie that developed among their peers, and they became more comfortable in their learning environment, which reduced their anxiety in terms of skill performance. When framed in Dollarhide et al.'s (2007) transparent pedagogy to teaching skills, students in this study reported they were more satisfied with their learning experiences because of the encouraged collaboration among students that resulted in decreased anxiety and increased confidence.

Further concerns were reflected in students' comments regarding the length of the class period, the scheduled time for the class, and the class syllabus. Stewart (1995) addressed concerns of adult learners as they pertained to feelings of isolation and lack of socialization because of outside demands such as employment, marriage, and family that influenced students' motivation and academic performance. In my study, counseling students made no mention of jobs or personal responsibilities specifically; however, some students commented that back-to-back classes were mentally exhausting. Class time was important to students who reflected that although class was seen as lengthy, time was not utilized effectively preventing the addition of more practice time for learning counseling skills. Students also perceived the course syllabus that outlined required outside assignments as overwhelming. They felt more attention should be given to class scheduling and individual class structuring. A few students even suggested adding an additional skills class.

An added finding from my study concerned the gender make-up of the class and the influence on student learning. One student described her experience with an all female class. She reported that her lack of experience counseling males, because of the lack of males in her class, interfered with her learning process. Her response supported Granello's (2010) descriptions of student development as a process of observing experiences, thinking about

experiences, and combining experiences with current knowledge. In this particular class which included all females, students lacked the experience of working with a male client and as one student described when asked to be the counselor in a role-play involving a male client, she “felt lost as a counselor.” Another possible concern could be the make-up of the students for my study. In the present study, no student made mention of culture, race or age as a factor that influenced their learning beginning counseling skills; however, a possible reason could be that all students in my study were Caucasian and the majority were under the age of 26, with these students not recognizing a need to introduce race, cultural or age as a determining factor in learning skills with diverse groups. Most counseling programs require a multicultural class and the CACREP standards (2009) require a common core curricular experience with knowledge of diversity issues. Because the students in my study were all Caucasian and the majority within a certain age group, they may have lacked the opportunity to practice counseling skills with individuals who are different from their own group. The absence of the opportunity to practice skills in a diverse setting could be viewed as a lack of integration of multicultural issues within a skills class.

Integration of personality traits and how the students viewed themselves as a person influenced their skills acquisition. Counseling students in this study felt the process of becoming a counselor was a progression over time and that integrating elements of their personality into their counselor self was important. Students in my study supported Guiffreda (2005) who encouraged students to do what comes naturally and use interventions based on personal characteristics and existing knowledge base. Students felt *encouraged* when the instructor fostered integration between their personality traits and skill acquisition in their developmental progression to becoming counselors.

## **Psychological Safety**

Fur and Carroll (2003) stated experiential learning used in counseling programs influences students emotionally and creates possible risks related to student growth. When expecting to learn only theory and content related to counseling, students may not be prepared for the self-disclosure and personal exploration that are required in many counseling programs. Balleweg (1990) commented that because counseling students may be required to discuss personal problems and concerns, they should not be the clients during counseling sessions. In this study, counseling students' responses echoed the cited literature. They stated that even though they saw the benefit of real-plays, they felt uncomfortable doing real-plays for fear of hurting their peers' feelings, exposing personal issues that neither were prepared to handle, or experiencing counter-transference issues. These findings were in disagreement with those of Jordan and Kelly (2004) who stated that beginning counseling students worry more about their ability to perform and less about the therapeutic relationship.

Feedback as an instructional method was also a psychological risk concern for students. Hollihan and Reid (1994) stated that feedback can be overwhelming, threatening, awkward, and emotional for counseling students. Auxier et al. (2003) remarked that students enter counseling programs with feelings of excitement; however, because of the increasing amount of feedback as students progress in their skill development, feelings of excitement turn into doubt. Overall, counseling students in my study reported initially feeling uncomfortable and cognizant of how feedback was delivered; however, students grew to welcome feedback from instructors and appreciated feedback from their fellow classmates as a sense of camaraderie developed. The sense of camaraderie reported by students supported Balleweg's (1990) idea that differing perspectives brought to the attention of all students for consideration and evaluation can promote

vicarious learning and cohesion among students. In this study, students felt that feedback was critical for the learning process and useful as a tool to enhance learning. Although students did welcome feedback, they remained cognizant of how they delivered feedback to others, structuring all feedback positively.

An additional finding regarding role-plays and real-plays pertained to psychological safety, which involved students assuming the role of clients and then switching to the role of counselor. Balleweg (1990) was critical of role-plays as a teaching method because students feel engulfed in the process of keeping track of information that emerges in a session when they are the counselor. Student responses in my study supported and added to the existing literature when they described difficulty switching between the role of the client and the counselor as they were immersed in their own emotional issues when acting as the client.

### **Limitations**

Creswell (2003) defined limitations as possible weaknesses in a study. The first limitation of the current study was the student sample. According to Creswell, qualitative research involves a small sample size that does not lend itself to generalizing across an entire population. The sample in my study consisted of nine graduate students who were enrolled in beginning counseling skills classes at three universities. Also, all students were Caucasian and a little over 90% of the sample was 25 years old or younger and female. Therefore, the results of my study cannot be generalized beyond the nine students who participated. A second limitation was the analysis and interpretation of the data. Although I used an independent qualitative auditor to check the accuracy of resulting meaning units, themes, and conclusions based on the textural, structural, and composite descriptions and triangulation of data sources; data could be interpreted differently depending on the individual who did the analysis (Creswell, 2007). A

third limitation resided in the format of the counseling training programs at each university. Each university site had different instructors and training formats; such as in-class practice sessions, counseling rooms equipped with two-way mirrors and recording devices, or coaches to assist counseling students in learning skills. A fourth limitation was the interview format. I developed an interview guide; however, I allowed students to lead the interviews when describing their lived experiences in counseling skills classes. Therefore, not all students commented on the same topics, but rather topics were specific to their experiences.

### **Implications for Counselor Educators**

Several implications emerged based from the findings of my research. First, the current findings contributed to the existing literature regarding the use of experiential teaching approaches for beginning counseling skills. Although counseling students in my study expected some experiential activities, counselor educators could be more cognizant that when students began counseling programs, they are accustomed to a modernistic approach to teaching. Counseling students may benefit from discussions regarding the advantages of using a constructivist approach to learning counseling skills. Furthermore, counselor educators could be mindful of their own behaviors when teaching students and take care to create an environment that fosters learning, encourages feedback, allows adequate time for skill demonstration, integrates students' personality traits into counselor self, and allows for new learning experiences especially when working with a different gender, race, or cultures. Additionally, it is important that counselor educators be aware of the impact on counseling students of the physical and emotional demands required by counseling programs. Consideration should be given to class schedules and the possible addition of a learning lab that could be included in skill classes or a requirement in the beginning of the program which would allow for more structured practice

time as a way to enhance student learning of skills. Although, counselor educators need to assist students in recognizing that learning counseling skills is a developmental process, they should encourage students to practice skills independently, outside of the classroom. Lastly, counselor educators should be more cognizant of the possible lack of multicultural experiences in the beginning skills class, which could possibly affect student learning. Counseling programs should incorporate multiculturalism in all facets of student learning experiences throughout the training program and create activities within the class or as an outside assignment that involve diversity issues.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Research with a focus on the gender or diversity issues among students in a beginning skills class would be beneficial. Of the three sites selected for my study, two classes consisted of all females with the third site having a mixture of males and females. Of the three sites, one site had no African-American students; rather all students were Caucasian. Further research on the lack of males and different races in a beginning counseling skills classroom could provide more insight into how gender and diversity issues influence learning for all students.

Age is another factor to consider for future research. Participants for my study ranged from the age of 23 to 50. Eight of the students were 25 years old or younger with one student age 50. A study with a focus on age and other diversity issues would be beneficial to determine any learning differences in how diversity issues make a difference in learning how to counsel various client populations.

At the administrative level, a study on scheduling classes would be helpful. In my study, some students were concerned about class schedules and viewed scheduling as a concern and hindrance to their learning. Back-to-back class schedules and the length of the classes were

mentioned as possible areas that influenced student learning. Further research on the best approach to scheduling classes and time allowed during skill classes that would allow students time to practice skills in a clinical setting could be helpful to students learning of beginning counseling skills.

Finally, consideration for further investigation of the various emotional experiences of counseling student and their abilities to receive feedback when using experiential teaching methods could benefit students. Specific teaching methods are needed that assist students in dealing with their anxiety and fears when learning counseling skills.

### **Personal Reflections**

As I sat to write my reflections, I was immediately taken aback by the enormous amount of work I have put into researching a subject that some may not find particularly exciting. My topic is not what I would consider flashy, which begs the question, what was my reason for selecting pedagogy of counseling skills as my dissertation topic? I recalled my days as a student in the beginning skills class, and I thought about what that experience was like for me. I remember sitting in the fishbowl and the overwhelming feelings I experienced. In all honesty, I wondered if I got what I needed from that class or whether I learned those skills along the way through my practice as a counselor.

As a counselor educator-in-training during my first teaching assistantship, I had the opportunity to be a part of the learning process of beginning counseling students. I was privileged to be a part of a group as both an educator and a student. I believe that was the moment I selected my dissertation topic. As an educator, I felt it is not only my duty, but also my responsibility to teach in a way that benefits students the most. I felt through my study, I could achieve that goal by adding to the existing literature on counseling pedagogy. I am

passionate about what we do as counselors and feel it is very important to maintain the integrity of our profession by producing competent, skillful future clinicians.



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## Appendices



Appendix A  
IRB Approval Letters

**University Committee for the Protection  
of Human Subjects in Research  
University of New Orleans**

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*Campus Correspondence*

Principal Investigator: Roxane L. Dufrene  
Co-Investigator: Brian K. Knight  
Date: June 21, 2012  
Protocol Title: "The lived experience of Master's level counseling students  
in a beginning skills class: A qualitative study"  
IRB#: 02Jun12

The IRB has deemed that the research and procedures are compliant with the University of New Orleans and federal guidelines. The above referenced human subjects protocol has been reviewed and approved using expedited procedures (under 45 CFR 46.116(a) category (7)).

Approval is only valid for one year from the approval date. Any changes to the procedures or protocols must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. Use the IRB number listed on this letter in all future correspondence regarding this proposal.

If an adverse, unforeseen event occurs (e.g., physical, social, or emotional harm), you are required to inform the IRB as soon as possible after the event.

Best wishes on your project!

Sincerely,



Robert D. Laird, Ph.D., Chair  
UNO Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research



**Institutional Review Board**  
Box 11851  
Phone: 549-2077

**Campus Correspondence**  
www.selu.edu/irb  
Fax: 549-3640

**DATE:** July 19, 2012  
**TO:** Brian Knight  
University of New Orleans  
**FROM:** Dr. Michelle Hall, Chair   
**RE:** IRB Action on Proposed Project

This memo is to inform you of the IRB action with regard to your proposal:

**Title:** The Lived Experiences of Master's Level Counseling Students in a Beginning Skills Class: A Qualitative Study

This proposal was given: Expedited Review:  X   
Full Committee Review: \_\_\_\_\_  
Exempt: \_\_\_\_\_

The result was: Full Approval:  X   
Denied Approval: \_\_\_\_\_

If anything other than Full Approval is recommended, it is your responsibility, as investigator, to submit changes/corrections or plans to accommodate conditions listed below to the Institutional Review Board prior to initiating the project. This approval is valid for one year from the date above, if data is to be collected after that time frame, the PI must submit a Continuation of Research Form.

**Failure to acquire full approval by IRB before implementation for any project which involves humans means that the PI is not acting in "good faith" with university policy and is not, therefore, guaranteed the protection of the university.**

Committee Comments:

IRB Number:2013-013

**NICHOLLS STATE UNIVERSITY**  
**Human Subjects Institutional Review Board**

Dr. Bobby Laird, Ph.D.  
Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects  
University of New Orleans  
Lakefront Campus

RE: Deferral of Mr. Brian Knight's HSIRB Protocol

Dear Dr. Laird,

I have received a copy of correspondence between your IRB board and Mr. Brian Knight regarding his project entitled: The lived experience of Master's level counseling students in a beginning skills class: A qualitative study. It is Nicholls' practice that graduate student human subjects research projects must be approved and monitored by the institution initiating the research.

Since his research has been approved by UNO's FWA Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, Mr. Knight may solicit participants for her study at Nicholls State University under a deferred protocol number IRBED 073012 001.

If I may be of additional assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

R. Denis Soignier, Ph.D.  
HS IRB Chairperson  
Nicholls State University

**Appendix B**  
**Introduction Letter**

## Introduction Letter

I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Development at the University of New Orleans. I am conducting research for my dissertation entitled, *The Lived Experiences of Master's Level Counseling Students in a Beginning Skills Class*. I am studying under the direction of Dr. Roxane L. Dufrene. The purpose of my study is to explore the lived experiences of counseling students enrolled in a beginning skills class.

Please read the information included in this letter and ask any questions you feel are pertinent. I would like to interview three master's level counseling students enrolled in a beginning counseling skills class in the counseling department. I request your approval to conduct the initial and follow-up interviews, which will last approximately 45-60 minutes for each interview. The interviews will take place approximately two weeks before the semester ends with a follow-up interview at the convenience of the student. The purpose of the follow-up interview is to allow each student to read the transcriptions of their original interviews for accuracy. Students will also be asked to keep a weekly journal throughout the semester. The initial interview will be digitally recorded. To maintain confidentiality, each digitally recorded tape, journal, and transcript will be assigned corresponding identifiers (pseudonym names) before the interviews begin. A transcriptionist will be hired to transcribe each digital recording and will be required to sign a statement of confidentiality. I will keep all digital recordings in a secure place and will destroy all recordings after they are transcribed and analyzed.

At the beginning of the interview, students will be asked to read and sign an informed consent form. Students will be informed that participation in my study is completely voluntary. Students will also be told that information provided will not be part of their class requirements and their professor will not have access to any of their information. If students choose not to participate or choose to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. I will explain to each student that all verbal interactions will be digitally recorded and each student will receive a copy of the informed consent. The results of my study may be published and presented at conferences and I will use every effort to protect students' identities. Students will be given contact information for Dr. Ann O'Hanlon (504) 280-3990 at the University of New Orleans should they have questions about their rights as research students. The University of New Orleans Institutional Review Board has approved my study (IRB # 02Jun12). For more information regarding the approval of my study, you may contact UNO IRB – Human Subject at 504-280-5454.

I would like to thank you in advance for your time and consideration. I will contact the department chairperson and the professor of record to obtain the requested information and answer any questions regarding my research.

Respectfully,

Brian K. Knight, LPC-S, NCC

**Appendix C**  
**Student Participation Form**

## Student Participation Form

My name is Brian K. Knight. I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Development at the University of New Orleans. I am conducting research for my dissertation on the lived experience of master's level counseling students in a beginning counseling skills class. To participate in the research, you should meet three criteria listed below.

Place a check by each criterion you meet.

- Registered and participating in a 3-hour beginning skills class. \_\_\_\_\_
- Have not had previous counseling experience. \_\_\_\_\_
- Plan to miss no more than one class for the entire semester. \_\_\_\_\_

As part of my study, you will be required to participate in two rounds of interviews that will last no longer than one hour each and will be completed at the end of the semester. You will also be required to complete weekly journals, which will be turned in at the end of the semester. Weekly entries are to be dated and made as soon as possible after your class is over or by the next day. Each entry should be a personal reflection of your experience in class that week. Reflections should include your feelings about classroom activities that may have influenced your performance or attention when learning skills. You may also include, but are not limited to, environmental conditions, your emotional state, and your interactions with the professor and fellow students. Journal entries should be as detailed as possible and should be written or typed legibly. Your participation is voluntary. Information you provide will not be part of your class requirements and your professor will not have access to any of your information. Refusal to participate at any time will involve no penalties or benefits.

Should you meet the criteria for participation and wish to participate, please provide contact information below, sign, and return this document at the end of class. You will be contacted within the week to confirm your participation. You will receive a copy of this signed document during the first interview.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Students Name (printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Email address and phone number

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



**Appendix D**  
**Informed Consent**

## Informed Consent

Dear Student:

I am conducting a qualitative research study under the direction of Dr. Roxane L. Dufrene in the College of Education and Human Development for the PhD in Counselor Education at the University of New Orleans. The purpose of my study is to explore the lived experiences of master's level students enrolled in a beginning counseling skills class.

I am requesting your participation in my study, which will involve an initial, digitally recorded, 45-60 minute interview that will be transcribed and a digitally recorded follow-up 45-60 minute interview. The purpose of the follow-up interview is to confirm accuracy of the transcription of the first interview. You will also be required to keep a weekly journal, which will be turned in to me at the end of the semester. A journal will be provided for you.

Participation in my research project is voluntary. Information you provide will not be part of your class requirements and your professor will not have access to any of your information. Refusal to participate at any time will involve no penalties or benefits. There are no foreseeable risks to students. There is no direct benefit to you. Your participation will possibly increase counselor educator awareness of counseling students' lived experiences when learning counseling skills. Your identity will remain anonymous. Your personal information will not be divulged. To maintain confidentiality, each digitally recorded tape, journal, and transcript will be assigned corresponding identifiers (pseudonym names) before the interview begins. A transcriptionist will be hired to transcribe each digital recording and will be required to sign a statement of confidentiality. I will keep digital recordings in a secure place and will destroy the recordings after they are transcribed and analyzed. The results of my study may be published and presented at different conferences. I will use every effort to protect your identity.

If you have questions about your rights as a research student, please contact Dr. O'Hanlon at (504) 280-6531 at the University of New Orleans for answers to questions about my research, your rights as a human research student, and your concerns regarding any research-related injuries. Please contact me at 318-235-1453 if you have any questions concerning my research study. You may also contact Dr. Roxane L. Dufrene, chair of my dissertation committee at (504) 280-7434.

By signing the signature line below, you are stating that you have read and understood or have had the informed consent explained to you to your satisfaction and are willing to participate in my study.

---

Student Name (printed) and Date

---

Student Signature and Date

## **Appendix E**

### **External Auditor Confidentiality Agreement Professional Transcriptionist Confidentiality Agreement**

**External Auditor Confidentiality Agreement  
Professional Transcriptionist Confidentiality Agreement**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, external auditor/transcriptionist, agree to maintain full confidentiality for any and all audiotapes and documents received from Brian K. Knight related to his doctoral study entitled *The Lived Experiences of Master's Level Counseling Students in a Beginning Skills Class: A Qualitative Study*. I agree to the following:

1. To hold in strictest confidence the identification of any individual that may be inadvertently revealed during the transcription of audio-taped interviews, or in any associated documents.
2. To not copy any audiotapes or computerized files of the transcribed interview texts and documents unless specifically requested to do so by Brian K. Knight.
3. To store all study-related audiotapes and documents in a safe, locked, and secure location as long as the materials are in my possession.
4. To return all audiotapes and study-related documents to Brian K. Knight in a complete and timely manner.
5. To delete all electronic files containing study-related documents from my computer hard drive and any backup devices.

I am aware that I can be held legally liable for any breach of this confidentiality agreement and for any harm incurred by individuals if I disclose identifiable information contained in the audiotapes, files, and documents I will have related to the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
External Auditor/Transcriber's Name (printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
External Auditor/Transcriber's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **Appendix F**

### **Initial and Follow-up Interview Protocol**

## Initial and Follow-Up Interview Protocol

### Initial Interview:

1. Arrive early at the prearranged interview site. Begin the verbal exchange with introductions and ask each student's permission to begin digital recording.
2. Discuss inclusion criteria to ensure the student is eligible to student in the study (see Appendix C).
3. Present the informed consent and allow time for the student to read the form. Verbally summarize the form to ensure the student understands the form. Respond to any questions and or concerns (see Appendix D).
4. Retrieve the signed consent form. Explain the purpose of the interview, guidelines, and assignment of the pseudonym name for the interviews, journals, and syllabi for the purpose of confidentiality. Explain that the interviews will be transcribed and ensure transcription confidentiality. Explain that the interview should last approximately 45-60 minutes, but could be longer.
5. Demographic Questions include:
  - a. Gender: Male  Female
  - b. Age:
  - c. Race:
  - d. Undergraduate degree:
  - e. Year of undergraduate degree:
  - f. Previously attended or presently in counseling: Yes  No
6. Example interview questions include:
  - a. Before starting the skills class, what did you think it would be like to learn counseling skills?
  - b. Is there a particular method of teaching you like more than others?
  - c. What about the teaching method(s) did you like the best (the worst)?
  - d. What was more important to you in the skills class, your grade or learning skills?
  - e. Do you feel you now know the skills and know the reason you would implement the skills?
  - f. What do you think prepared you in your skills class for you to begin seeing clients?
  - g. Was there something personal (positive or negative) that occurred during the semester that impacted your learning of skills?
  - h. How would you describe your emotional state of mind when practicing skills?
  - i. How would you describe your receptivity to feedback?
  - j. How would you describe your receptivity to feedback from your peers versus the instructor?
7. Provide time for the student to provide feedback, ending comments, and reflections.
8. End with reminders of confidentiality and the follow-up interview.

### Follow-up Protocol:

1. Arrive early at the prearranged interview site. Begin the verbal exchange with introductions. Ask each student for permission to begin digital recording.
2. Present the student with the transcribed interview and instructions to check the material for accuracy. Any changes made will be noted in the margin of the transcripts prior to data analysis.
3. Summarize responses and begin termination.
4. Allow for debriefing. Ask for feedback and reflections, if needed.
5. Terminate with a closing statement.

## Vita

Brian Keith Knight earned his Bachelor of Arts from the University of Louisiana at Monroe in Social work in 1985. He went on to earn his Masters of Education in Community Counseling at the University of Louisiana at Monroe in 2000. After completing his supervision requirements, Brian sat for his Professional Counselor exam becoming a Licensed Professional Counselor, a National Certified Counselor, as well as a Board approved supervisor for Counselor Interns. In 2007, Brian began working for his PhD in Counselor Education and Supervision earning the PhD in August of 2013. Brian's career has been working with individuals with a chronic or persistent mental illness.