



# A narrative inquiry into the lived experiences of graduate counselling psychology students working with psychotherapy clients

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How can education graduate programs better serve the needs of their students?

# Our Study



## Research Question

What are graduate counselling psychology student narratives of their experiences working with psychotherapy clients at their practicum?

# Researcher Positionality




## ***Topic and Research Question***

- MA students in Counselling Psychology
- Internships in university and private practice settings
- Research topic is personally meaningful and impactful
- Strong theoretical leaning towards narrative and relational-cultural therapy

## ***Research Process***

- Insider perspective; enhanced understanding of subject/participant experiences
- Potential for biased interpretation of research findings

## ***Research Participants***

- Our positions influence our interactions with the research participants
    - Contribute to sense of safety and trust
    - Fears surrounding being judged or perceived as inadequate/incompetent
- 



# Framework

## Narrative

*Why? Because stories are important*

# Methodology

Recruitment, participants,  
data collection, and  
narrative inquiry using  
Thematic Analysis





## Recruitment

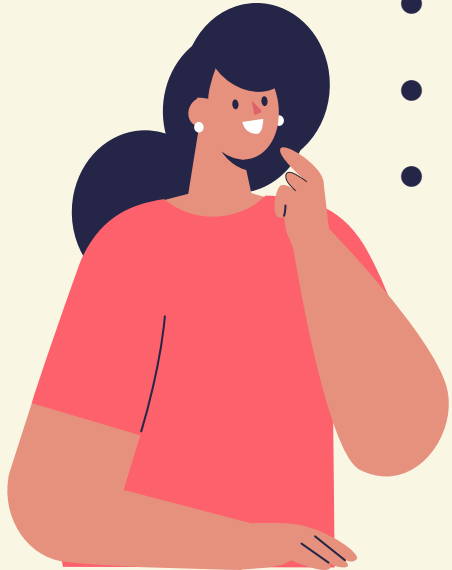
### Convenience/Purposeful Sampling

We contacted the program director (Dr. Nick Gazzola) to send out a recruitment letter to second year Master's Counselling Psychology students who were currently undergoing their psychotherapy practicum

# Participants

## ***Recruited 4 participants:***

- 3 identified as female and 1 identified as male
- All in their mid-twenties
- See clients both virtually and in person
- 3 completing practicum in Ottawa, 1 in Montreal
- Practicum settings include community organizations, post-secondary institutions, and private practice





# Data Collection

- Four audio-recorded narrative interviews
- In-person or virtual (participant preference)
- Short interview guide as reference
  - *Initial understanding of practicum and role of counselor*
  - *Experience of finding a practicum*
  - *Present thoughts/feelings about practicum experience*
  - *Supervision process*
- Interview transcription



# Handling the Data

- Read the transcripts and re-wrote participant narratives
- Used Braun & Clarke's 6 steps of Thematic Analysis:
  - 1) Became familiar with the data
  - 2) Generated initial codes
  - 3) Searched for themes among codes
  - 4) Reviewed themes
  - 5) Defined themes
  - 6) Wrote down the themes



# Study Findings

- Seven major themes
- Corresponding sub-themes
- Select participant quotes



# Study Findings

1. Absence of practical training for provision of psychotherapy
2. Uncertainty surrounding expectations and responsibilities of practicum students
3. Mixed feelings surrounding the application and interview process
4. Feelings of incompetence
5. Importance of the supervisory relationship
6. Therapist-in-training role adjustment is emotionally and cognitively taxing
7. Sense of personal and professional fulfillment

# Absence of practical training

- Overemphasis on learning theories of change
- Lack of emphasis on skills training and intervention
- Perception that program length (and thus duration of training) is too short
- Lack of information about practicing psychotherapy in other provinces (like Quebec)
- Perception that program has missing elements (e.g., multicultural counselling course is not mandatory)

01



## Participant Quotes

“Not a lot of, like, structured intervention training [...] the program was a lot more, like just teaching micro skills in general... like paraphrasing, active listening, how to show that you're engaged, but never really anything super structured. So, I think for me, at first when I actually got there [practicum], because there also wasn't any of that there in terms of training, they were just kind of like, 'here you go'. I was like 'oh my goodness, how do I do it?? I was like, 'I don't know how to do that!'”

# Feelings of Incompetence

02

- Self-doubt
- Questioning capacity to be helpful to clients
- Lack of familiarity, knowledge, or skills to work with certain presenting issues (e.g., trauma, eating disorders)
- Evaluating your own performance is challenging
- Performance anxiety



## Participant Quotes

“...This is the thing that I’ll probably carry forever, but I felt really really guilty seeing clients... and like my first two weeks, I [felt] very very overwhelming guilt... I couldn’t sleep at night guilty. And I just remember feeling like, ‘oh god, oh no’, like ‘what was I doing?’ And I remember going into supervision and just crying, and saying ‘I feel awful because these are students who really want help and they got me.’”



# Participant Quotes

“...It kind of hit me in those moments that like, these are real people. Like, these are people dealing with, like, big things. And I remember at the end of the day, feeling like a wash of overwhelm of like, ‘who am I to do this job? I don’t know anything. And I don’t know anything that can help these people. So like, what am I doing?’”

# Importance of the supervisory relationship

- A sense of perceived support from your supervisor contributes to role adjustment
- Fear of negative evaluation contributes to feelings of incompetence

03



## Participant Quotes

“[Supervision is] something she’s very passionate about, right now in her career, and it really kind of shines through that she really cares [...] And I mean you come in, like you don’t know what to expect and you’re like, ‘oh my god, am I gonna be terrible at this?’ And you know, you just have this calming presence that knows what they’re doing. And can kind of help you out when there are rough patches.”

## Participant Quotes

“My supervisor’s office is 4 doors down from mine. I can’t just be spilling my life story, because then I’m gonna walk by her, and be like, ‘hey. You know my shit.’ I don’t want her to be like, ‘oof’ [...] I don’t want my supervisor to look at me any differently. If I tell them shit that’s going on for me or, like, shit that has gone on, that kind of could impact what I do, I don’t want this person to look at me differently and be like, ‘are you okay?’ ‘Yeah, I’m fine. I will tell you if I’m not.’”

# Sense of personal and professional fulfillment

04

- Work with a diverse range of presenting issues
- Emotionally-charged and powerful experience
- Feelings of profound care towards the client
- Opportunity to ground one's practice in theory
- Growth and development as a result of being challenged by difficult clients
- Feelings of contentedness in the role
- Sense of accomplishment



# Participant Quotes

“... I love it. It feels really good, where I’m like, I actually feel like this job gives me energy...it fills up my cup. Like, it can be hard at times, for sure, but overall, very net positive. It’s that awesome. If I could go back, I would pick it every single time, every time!”



# Concluding Insights

- Feelings of incompetence are typical and pervasive
- Greater program duration and incorporation of skills/ intervention training may help mitigate these feelings
- Having a supervisor who is supportive and a good “fit” is crucial to the experience.
- Better guidance surrounding how to select a placement site and supervisor may be beneficial
- The experience is meaningful, despite challenges



# Potential Implications

- Feelings of incompetence are pervasive. It may be helpful to address them through lectures and workshops across a range of programs.
- Having a positive and supportive relationship with your supervisor may contribute to well-being and satisfaction, both in academia and the workplace.
- Importance of self-care and help-seeking behaviours, especially for students in helping professions.



# Thanks!

Questions? Comments?

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