

December 2025

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Recommended Citation

Anandavalli, S; Harrichand, John J. S.; and McCullough, Rafe (2025) "Research Mentoring Needs of International Doctoral Counseling Students: An Interpretive Phenomenological Inquiry," *Teaching and Supervision in Counseling*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 3 , Article 4.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/tsc07d9n6>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/tsc/vol7/iss3/4>

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Research Mentoring Needs of International Doctoral Counseling Students: An Interpretive Phenomenological Inquiry

Received: 05/16/24
Revised: 08/06/24
Accepted: 09/23/24
DOI: 10.7290/tsc07d9n6

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Abstract

The authors sought to explore the research mentoring needs of international doctoral counseling students (IDCSs). The purpose of this inquiry was to help research mentors better support this community. Centering relational cultural theory as the theoretical framework, the authors interviewed 14 participants. These individuals were identified using convenience and snowball sampling. Using interpretive phenomenological analysis, three grand themes emerged from participants' interviews: socialization and belonging in academia, power and systemic barriers, and mutuality and research. Implications for research mentors and/or counselor educators, and future research are also discussed.

Significance to the Public

As international doctoral counseling students (IDCSs) increase in numbers, it is imperative that mentors and institutions are prepared to offer culturally congruent and relational mentorship. Providing support and advocating for IDCSs can help widen the representation in the counseling field and increase ontological diversity in mental health research and scholarship.

Keywords: international doctoral counseling students, relational cultural theory, interpretive phenomenological analysis, research mentorship, counselor education

Research mentorship is defined as “a complex, dynamic relationship that occurs within an academic setting. The mentor, a more experienced researcher, offers both relational and instructional support to the protege in research generation and collaboration and in professional development” (Briggs & Pehrsson, 2008, p. 103). Within counselor education, it appears that some doctoral students graduate without well-developed research identities as part of the overall professional identity as counselor educators and supervisors (Borders et al., 2012; Borders et al., 2014; Okech et al., 2006; Wester & Borders, 2014). Counseling literature indicates that when emerging professionals receive research mentorship, they experience greater

support and confidence as they navigate their academic careers (Anekstein, 2021; Cisneros et al., 2022; Rawls, 2008). Yet, extant counseling literature provides limited perspectives on the research mentoring needs of international doctoral counseling students (IDCSs), who comprise a growing community within the profession (Amparbeng & Pillay, 2021). Our research goal is to draw attention to perspectives on research mentorship held by IDCSs and help research mentors offer appropriate support to this community.

To investigate how IDCSs construct meanings, the authors deemed it essential to employ a methodology that enables them to understand how

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participants interpret their experiences. The participants are trying to understand their experiences while the researchers are trying to make sense of how they understand their experiences. Thus, to explore the research mentoring needs of IDCSSs, we used interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996). We also view this phenomenon through the lens of relational cultural theory (RCT; Miller, 1976) to elucidate how IDCSSs navigate complex relationships in academia. RCT was specifically chosen given its emphasis on psychosocial connections, respect, mutuality, and reciprocity. Furthermore, RCT theorists recognize that social (e.g., racism, sexism) and political factors (e.g., visa restrictions, travel bans) impact human relationships (Jordan, 2017). We review the literature addressing research mentorship within counselor education. Although our primary audience is research mentors working with IDCSSs, adopting a RCT (Miller, 1976) perspective organically yielded implications for counseling programs and academic institutions.

Research Mentorship in Counselor Education

Counseling literature indicates that research mentees who receive greater support in counselor education also report increased scholarship productivity and growth through refereed publications and presentations (Cisneros et al., 2022). Furthermore, several researchers have noted that having supportive faculty (e.g., mentors) introduces doctoral counseling students to research opportunities, allowing them to internalize and integrate their identity as scholar-practitioners (Cisneros et al., 2022; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Harrichand, 2021; Thacker & Barrio Minton, 2021). Thus, research mentorship is a beneficial platform to support emerging counselor educators by building their confidence, empowering them, increasing their research productivity, and promoting researcher identity development (Borders et al., 2012; Briggs & Pehrsson, 2008; Thacker & Barrio Minton, 2021).

International Counseling Doctoral Students (ICDSs)

Although research mentorship increases scholarly productivity and has numerous benefits for both mentors and mentees, mentees from minoritized backgrounds (e.g., based on race, ethnicity, gender, immigration status, and sexual orientation) may stand to especially benefit from this relationship (Benishek et al., 2004; Thacker & Barrio Minton, 2021). Minoritized counselor educators face barriers (e.g., racist hiring practices, limited support for work visas, and green card applications) that severely impede their professional success (e.g., Kuo et al., 2021; Seyeneh, 2018). One such minoritized community is international students training to be counselor educators. IDCSSs account for 4% of all doctoral students in counseling programs accredited by CACREP (CACREP, 2015). They are exposed to multiple stressors ranging from intercultural transitions to visa-related issues in seeking internships (Interiano & Lim, 2018). IDCSSs are also limited by the number of hours they can work off campus and denial of future optional practical training employment postgraduation, in addition to dealing with the typical stressors associated with pursuing higher education — culture shock, language barriers, isolation, etc. (Kuo et al., 2021; Leon & Chmiel, 2013; Seyeneh, 2018). Kuo and colleagues (2021) found IDCSSs in the United States experienced limited opportunities for research and publication, adversely impacting their productivity and career, compounded by visa-related issues.

The concerns experienced by IDCSSs are often exacerbated by limited support from faculty. Seyeneh (2018) chronicles unique stressors for IDCSSs due to counselor education faculty's "lack of understanding of international students' differences and needs ... favoring domestic students ... particularly in research, counseling, supervision, and multicultural skills training" (p. 103). Participants in the study shared a collective sense of feeling unwelcome in professional relationships, in addition to disclosing that the demands of their doctoral program and financial hardships (e.g., the exorbitant costs of attending and presenting at

counseling conferences, and limited funding opportunities to non-U. S. citizens) resulted in decreased social interactions.

The experiences of institutional oppression among IDCs were further impacted by unsupportive faculty members who lacked cultural competence. These faculty members devalued the strengths of IDCs, had expectations that IDCs would comprehend “unspoken classroom cultural and social norms” without acknowledging language barriers, and provided only limited mentorship opportunities (Seyeneh, 2018, p. 131). Adding to the challenges IDCs experience (Kuo et al., 2021; Seyeneh, 2018), institutions often demonstrated bias in their recruitment, promotion, and tenure of faculty, leaving professionals from marginalized populations especially vulnerable to institutional racism and poor professional outcomes (Gasman et al., 2015). For instance, institutions may adopt policies that do not support immigration paperwork and the green card application process for IDCs, citing financial reasons. Consequently, failure to explicitly center a systemic and relational cultural perspective within research mentorship may isolate and render IDCs invisible.

Furthermore, given that research productivity and scholarship are a vital part of the hiring and recruitment process in counselor education (Cisneros et al., 2022; Davis et al., 2006; Kuo et al., 2021), it is urgent and necessary that research mentors working with IDCs and counselor educators in general are keenly aware of research mentoring needs of IDCs. Researchers in the counseling profession have emphasized the significance of cultural competency, social justice, and trust in mentoring relationships (e.g., Cisneros et al., 2022; Thacker & Barrio Minton, 2021). However, there has been a gap in the literature when it comes to exploring how genuine, authentic, trusting, and mutually respectful mentoring relationships can be a supportive factor in meeting these previously mentioned challenges. Additionally, the counseling literature indicates that there may be subtle but ongoing pressure on IDCs to assimilate, with limited discussion on mutual and reciprocal cultural exchange between IDCs and

institutions and leadership (Interiano & Lim, 2018). This limited focus may lead to the omission of crucial perspectives from IDCs regarding their research mentoring experiences and could potentially result in the alienation of this diverse community. Our research question was as follows: *What are the research mentoring needs of international doctoral counseling students from a relational cultural perspective?* Specifically, we employ an RCT perspective, acknowledging the role of systemic barriers in developing authentic relationships.

Theoretical Framework: Relational Cultural Theory (RCT)

Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) was developed by Jean Baker Miller in 1976. While most human development theories emphasize autonomy and individuality, Miller noted that humans grow and expand in their potential when they grow in mutual, healthy, and nurturing relationships. Miller (1976) highlighted that as humans grow and develop, they become relationally more complex. Hence, adopting a relational and contextual lens may provide a framework to better understand people’s needs and support them accordingly.

Miller identified eight basic values of RCT. These are *growth-fostering relationships* (increased awareness and value of the relationship, resulting in increased self-worth for all parties involved, and more motivation for connection for parties beyond the relationship under consideration); *empathy* (understanding the experiences of others while resonating with one’s own feelings); *mutual empathy* (all parties involved in the relationship move from isolation to connection, and allow oneself to be meaningfully impacted by others); *authenticity* (representing oneself fully and honestly in relationships); *strategies of disconnection* (relationally injured individuals isolate themselves, distorting their realities, and blaming oneself and/or others excessively); *central relational paradox* (chronic relational isolation can result in condemned isolation or the belief that healthy relationships are no longer possible for oneself); *relational images* (concepts or images that people

hold about their understanding of relationships, which in turn impacts their behaviors in relationships); *relational resilience* (the ability to connect, reconnect, and avoid disconnection even in the face of adversity); and *relational competence* (the ability to build and sustain meaningful and mutual relationships by learning from one's experiences throughout one's lifetime).

Jordan (2017) summarized the basic tenets of RCT. Firstly, people grow toward and through relationships during their lifetime. Next, mature functioning is evidenced by mutually growing toward each other, as opposed to away from each other. Third, growth is characterized by relational differentiation and elaboration. Additionally, growth-fostering relationships are founded on mutual empathy and mutual empowerment. Fifth, in growth-fostering relationships, all members grow and develop. The development is not unidirectional. Lastly, in therapy and therapeutic relationships, mutual empathy is a vehicle for change.

RCT theorists such as Comstock and colleagues (2008) and Duffey and Somody (2011) also noted that relationships are impacted by systemic challenges such as racism, sexism, ableism, and classism. Individuals may experience barriers in expressing themselves authentically due to centuries of persecution they and their groups have faced in a stratified society like ours. Regrettably, such barriers may further isolate individuals and growth, rupturing relationships and connections. RCT experts Cor and Chan (2017) observed that while the origins of RCT can be traced to an analysis of sexism and genderism, throughout its history its framework has been employed to build connections among other oppressed communities.

The authors of this article note that mentorship, at its heart, is a mutual relationship that is dedicated to development. Given the emphasis on growth, connection, and change, mentors may benefit from adopting an RCT approach to them. However, considering the specific intersection we focus on — international doctoral students in counseling programs (i.e., IDCSSs), we also draw attention to how systemic and cultural factors impact relationships.

The authors of this article conducted an extensive literature review on Google Scholar, ProQuest, and PsycINFO using six search terms including “relational cultural theory”, “mentorship”, “advising”, and “doctoral students in counselor education”. Although no research studies in counselor education had explored the research mentoring needs of IDCSSs using RCT, the authors noted a few related inquiries. Purgason and colleagues (2016) noted that RCT, when applied to advising relationships with minoritized students, can be beneficial. RCT's emphasis on mutually respectful and growth-oriented relationships created a foundation of trust for advisees. Dipre and Luke (2020) shared similar commentary in their conceptual article discussing the historical context of RCT and its relevance in advising relationships in counselor education. The authors of this article wish to advance the extant knowledge in the counseling profession by focusing on research mentorship needs of IDCSSs using an RCT approach.



Method

Our research question for this study was as follows: *What are the research mentoring needs of international doctoral counseling students from a relational cultural perspective?* To investigate how IDCSSs construct meanings within their distinct social and personal contexts while undertaking research in doctoral programs in the United States, the authors deemed it essential to employ a methodology that enables them to understand how participants interpret their experiences. The participants are trying to understand their experiences while the researchers are trying to make sense of how the participants understand their respective experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). IPA limits the chances of researchers imposing their subjective beliefs and assumptions on participants' experiences (Smith, 1996) by engaging in regular bracketing, incorporating the auditor's feedback, and member checking. Given the specific and multifaceted challenges IDCSSs experience, the authors wanted to deliberately explore how IDCSSs interpreted their research

mentoring needs, thus necessitating an IPA methodology. The study included the three concepts of IPA: *phenomenology* (the study of experience — their research mentoring needs); *hermeneutics* (the theory of interpretation — how IDCs interpreted their needs in the context of cross-cultural relationships, and mutuality); and *idiographic* (a particular person, in this case, an IDCs, making sense of their experience [Smith, 1996]).

Researcher Positionality

Prior to this IPA inquiry, the first and second authors identified as IDCs with Asian heritage, and eventually transitioned into their current roles as counselor educators. They immersed themselves in the IDCs community and regularly participated in webinars and conference presentations as subject matter experts. Thus, the present inquiry is a by-product of several such dialogues and collective reflections. The third researcher, a white counselor educator who also holds other minoritized identities, was not an IDCs but was a high school international student and has extensive experience working with international high school students who hold J-1 visas. He has been an active research mentor and has extensively engaged in critical and social justice work in counseling. Each researcher's reflexivity documentation (available upon request), an integral part of IPA, served to identify potential blind spots centering typecasts and assumptions surrounding IDCs and their research mentorship experiences.

Recruitment and Participants

For this study, which received institutional review board (IRB) approval, the inclusion criteria were the following: participants needed to be at least 18 years of age; they were required to have self-perceived proficiency in English (interview language); they had to hold a valid F-1 or J-1 visa (i.e., higher education/student visas in the United States) for at least 6 months; and they had to be actively enrolled as full-time students in a CACREP-accredited doctoral program in counseling. Individuals who identified as

immigrants with a Green Card or second-generation immigrants were not included in the inquiry. Recruitment flyers included information on the aim of the study and contact information for the first author. The flyers were shared through counseling listservs (i.e., Counselor Education and Supervision Network Listserv [CESNET], International Students and Faculty Interest Network, ACA Connect) and direct recruitment emails to CACREP-accredited counseling program directors across the United States. Convenience and snowball sampling was used for this inquiry. A total of 17 participants responded to the recruitment announcement. However, three did not meet the inclusion criteria (e.g., they identified as immigrants or refugees but not as international graduate students with F-1 visas). Fourteen individuals were deemed eligible. Participants reviewed the IRB-approved consent form before completing the individual, semi-structured interview, and they selected their pseudonym. Participants' ages ranged from 25 to 40 with the mean age being 31 years. For more details on participants' demographics, please see Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Participants (N = 14)

Variable	n	%
Continent		
Asia	8	57.14%
Africa	1	7.14%
Europe	1	7.14%
South America	2	14.2%
North America	2	14.2%
Gender		
Male	2	14.3%
Female	12	85.7%
Age Range		
25–35	11	78.5%
36–45	3	21.5%
ACES Region		
SACES	0	0%
WACES	0	0%
NARACES	6	42.8%
RMACES	2	14.28%
NCACES		

Data Collection

Participants completed the consent form and an online demographic questionnaire to determine eligibility. No incentives were offered to the participants in the study. Using a semi-structured interview protocol, the first author interviewed all eligible participants. The questions were developed based on an extensive review of the counseling literature (e.g., Benishek et al., 2004; Kuo et al., 2021; Seyeneh, 2018), and the researchers' research mentorship experiences, particularly interacting with other IDCSSs. The authors carefully analyzed gaps in the extant research and developed interview questions based on the same. The authors also attempted to infuse RCT in development of the interview questions, incorporating themes such as mutuality, growth, and reciprocity. The open-ended interview questions (e.g., *How does your identity as an international doctoral counseling student shape your needs in a research mentoring relationship?*; *How does your research mentorship experience influence your ability to conduct scholarly projects and publish in refereed journals?*) allowed participants to describe their research mentoring needs. Appropriate follow-up questions and prompts (e.g., *Can you give me an example of that?*; *Tell me more about that experience*) were provided to invite thick descriptions of the phenomenon. Each interview was audio-recorded and then transcribed by a secure transcription service. All interviews were completed online via a HIPAA-compliant version of Zoom. Interviews ranged from 60–91 minutes in length ($M = 78$ minutes).

Data Analysis

The analysis team was composed of two coders (the first and second authors) and an auditor (the third author). Each interview transcript was considered a unit of analysis. The coders thoroughly read the first transcript several times to become accustomed to the material. Following Smith and Osborn's (2015) recommendations, an open-coding protocol was followed. Key concepts from each section were coded, resulting in the development of a codebook with 38 distinct codes. After collaboratively coding three transcripts, and documenting the codebook,

the first and second authors individually coded the remaining 11 transcripts. New codes were added to the codebook when needed, after consulting with the collaborating coder and auditor, resulting in a total of 47 codes. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) recommend that similar codes are clustered into superordinate themes or subthemes, which are then further clustered into grand themes. Following these guidelines, the first and second authors analyzed the data and created a grand theme list with its relevant subthemes based on all the participants' narratives. The third author served as an auditor to provide feedback on the representativeness of the grand themes and subthemes.

While IPA inquiries acknowledge and encourage researchers' subjectivity, the researchers engaged in consistent efforts to be aware of their biases (e.g., IDCSSs mentees mostly model collectivistic values; Black and Brown IDCSSs experience more challenges than their white counterparts; IDCSSs are keenly aware of institutional racism and its impact) and how it influenced the inquiry through trustworthiness. There are four aspects of effective qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), and the team pursued each aspect through diverse strategies: *credibility* (achieved through member checking and feedback from the auditor); *transferability* (achieved through multiple data points for each subtheme); *dependability* (achieved through utilizing external auditor's feedback, consulting experts in the field); and *confirmability* (achieved through field notes).

While several qualitative inquiries in counseling literature often use a tally system to indicate the frequency of a quote, the research team made an intentional decision to distance itself from such an approach. The methodological philosophy of IPA indicates that irrespective of the frequency or number of individuals who endorse a particular experience or idea, researchers using the IPA tradition must make every effort to communicate participants' narratives as they pertain to the research question (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). For instance, the value of an experience endorsed by four participants is similar in worth and relevance to a different experience endorsed by nine participants.

Attaching a numerical connotation to the themes and subthemes dilutes and deviates from the guidelines issued by Smith (1996).

Based on the auditor's feedback, the name of one grand theme and two subthemes were edited to reflect participants' experiences more accurately. Respective individual and grand themes were shared with each participant to receive relevant feedback (member checking), with six participants responding that the themes were accurately reflective of their experiences. The participants requested no changes. The authors did not receive a response from the other eight participants despite three attempts to contact them.

Findings

Using IPA, the authors identified 3 grand themes, with a total of 10 subthemes. The 3 grand themes are *socialization and belonging in academia*, *power and systemic barriers*, and *mutuality and research*. Findings from each of the themes are presented next.

Belonging and Socialization in Academia

The participants in the study noted that a significant part of research mentoring relationship was to foster a sense of belonging and connection in academia. As individuals with unique cultural norms and limited familiarity with expectations within U.S. academic culture, they shared narratives of challenges and support.

Relational Needs

In the first subtheme of *relational needs* (needs that are met through social connectedness), the participants discussed various factors that shaped the health of the mentoring relationship. These included aspects such as mentors taking the initiative to reach out and support, and offering validation and acceptance. Dale noted that, "Transitioning as an international student into

academia within the U.S. is not an easy situation. And I like the fact that my mentor tapped into just supporting me emotionally during that time." While emotional support was helpful to Dale and several other participants, Mustafa noted that consistency in that support was often critical yet lacking:

It was always like I could meet them [i.e., the research mentor] seven times in a month, or sometimes 3 months we wouldn't talk to each other. I think there were months that I just felt lost and I lost my motivation and never got back to it.... That was the hardest thing; I just wasn't sure about the relationship.

Another integral part of relational needs was participants' desire to have their research ideas respected by their mentors. Many participants noted that their research ideas were often close to their heart and had significant personal meaning. Honoring the research ideas and offering appropriate feedback was important for IDCSs participants. Alex shared,

Just respecting what I want to do ... and trying to honor them as best we can ... she's [i.e., the research mentor] always been supportive and trying to keep it as close to the way I want it as I can.... And that's been really great, just to honor my idea and my passion.

Participants in the study noted that academic relationship culture, specifically research culture, was different in the United States, compared to their home country. Even seemingly small gestures such as initiating an email or asking for support often seemed to be laden with cultural context and had a dramatic impact on how participants navigated academic cultures and felt connected to the program. Mustafa shared that,

They always encourage you as doctoral students to visit a professor's room and just knock on their door ... "I like the project you're doing, I heard about it, can I be included?" This is already a hard thing to do for new research doctoral students, but someone from another culture, there's another layer to that ... our cultural norms about asking for help ... are so different.

Challenges in Training and Productivity

The second subtheme was *challenges in training and productivity*. Several participants noted that they wanted to learn more about what research meant in the counseling profession, and wished to contribute in meaningful ways. However, lack of clear support made it challenging to engage in productive research. Hayat noted that she hadn't developed a meaningful research mentoring relationship at the time of the study, despite wanting a research mentor and having extensive years of research experience. She observed, "I'm not doing anything that's contributing towards a publication or a conference submission.... And if there was a research mentor, if the mentorship was focused on research, I think that part of it would be more [intentional]." Clarisse was eager to get started on research and disclosed that she struggled with limited structure in the mentoring relationship. She noted that mentors often didn't clearly communicate training expectations, which were especially challenging for IDCSSs who navigated a new cultural context.

On one hand, my job is 100% being a researcher, his [i.e., the research mentor] research is 5% of his job. I feel like the lack of structure from what is needed, what he's looking for ... has hindered a little bit of my view in research.

Participants in the inquiry observed that their research productivity was shared by subtle rules and expectations within profession. Often, these rules dictated what kind of research topics they could pursue, and how it may impact one's professional networks. Esther also referenced how she needed to understand the nuances of an inequitable academic environment and manage how authentic she could be:

[W]e don't always think we have permission to do something ... once some professor said, "You have to think about the topics that you're going to look at, because you might not get as much support ... because it generates so much contention or controversy."

Participants noted, they regularly feared their English language proficiency could impede their productivity and their mentors' perception of IDCSSs' aptitude. Their narratives often included harsh self-evaluation, and self-worth that often indicated the severity of their fears. Isa shared, "In Spanish, I can write in 1 minute or 2 minutes, a page ... I am afraid to be a loser or failure.... I don't want her to think that I am stupid."

Power and Systemic Barriers

The second grand theme addressed power and systemic barriers (policies, practices, and relationships that prevent people and communities from fully participating and engaging in society).

Mentors' Power and Cultural Competence

The first subtheme was *mentors' power and cultural competence*. Participants noted that international students often have unique needs shaped by sociocultural factors. Research mentors need to be keenly aware of these factors and actively address them in the mentoring relationship. Dale stated,

People assume that just because a person has a PhD and they are faculty that they are culturally competent and ready to work with mentees, and that's not the reality. I found that there are a lot of faculty members who lack competence when it comes to cultural awareness to foster ... healthier research mentorship relationships, especially as it relates to international students.

Z observed that international students are often invisibilized in research mentoring relationships. Z shared that IDCSSs are often made to feel that they don't matter, and mentors are rarely trained to respond to the community's needs. She stated, "I don't think a lot of international students can receive such unconditional positive regard from their professor because ... they're invisible, they just stay invisible."

Immigration and Acculturation Needs

The second subtheme was *immigration and acculturation needs*. Clarisse shared that her participation in international conferences was often impeded by immigration-related barriers and mentors often didn't understand how IDCSSs were uniquely impacted by it. For instance, she couldn't leave the United States without carefully considering visa implications. Given the limitations of student visas, she feared being unable to re-enter the United States after leaving for conferences and workshops, halting her education. Her mentor, unfortunately, did not fully understand these systemic barriers or empathize with her, which compounded her stress and isolation:

It was very hard for me to just open up to him and say, "Hey, I don't think I can leave the country." ... I don't think he understood what it meant for me to leave ... how my immigration status deeply affected the way that we pursued research, because ... I mean, I could publish it, but I just couldn't go there and speak.

Leaning on their collectivistic values, many participants were also concerned for the incoming cohorts of IDCSSs, and how lack of meaningful connections could impact research collaboration and overall well-being. Luna was concerned that as the COVID-19 pandemic prevailed and limited opportunity for in-person interactions existed, new IDCSSs may suffer:

Recognizing within a pandemic, ... I always wonder about the incoming students who are going to foster relationships within this COVID time, how difficult that would be for them, especially students who are international, ... starting school this fall, ... and forging relationships, especially when they don't necessarily have all the support systems.

Need for Financial and Institutional Support

The third subtheme was the *need for financial and institutional support*. Several participants, including Alex, noted that more support, especially from

counseling organizations, was needed to encourage and sustain IDCSSs in the United States, and that research mentors could play a pivotal role in advocating for the same. The participants noted that dialogues and opportunities developed for minority communities did not always include IDCSSs, resulting in further isolation and invisibilization. Alex shared, "Work visas are expensive.... [I]f ACA can create a fund of some sort to help ... it'd be really progressive of them. Can mentors advocate for us?" Luna also communicated the urgent need for financial equity in supporting IDCSSs and their research work. She shared,

A lot of international students cannot apply for loans in the U.S., so ... if you are providing them this stipend, is [the] stipend equitable to somebody who is a U.S. citizen and can have additional financial support...? The NBCC Minority Scholarship is only for U.S. students, although it's a minority scholarship.

Mutuality and Research

The third grand theme that emerged from our inquiry was *mutuality and research*. Participants in the inquiry noted that they needed their research mentors to understand the unique contributions, strengths, and perspectives that IDCSSs brought to the mentoring relationship, and the counseling profession. This theme is comprised of three subthemes, discussed next.

Desire to Contribute to the Profession

In the first subtheme, participants discussed their *desire to contribute to the profession*. Happy echoed the role of hard work and persistence among IDCSSs:

We're hard workers ... we will go the extra mile... we compensate a lot on trying to stand out within the crowd of ... American students ... so ... I work harder and I do things that I'm not asked to, just to kind of stand out and advance counseling.

Jessica agreed with Happy and noted that she learned several aspects of her work ethic from her cultural background, stating, "I think commitment is

the one that came from my culture. And that, once I'm in, I'm committed.... I want to contribute. Put my effort in it."

Role of Community

The second subtheme was the *role of community*. Dale stated that, for him, research meant reaching out to his community members and having a positive impact on their lives:

There's a lot of deeper meaning that goes into this for me in terms of my community and my people, my ancestors ... How do I foster an awareness for the populations I'm writing about, because I care so deeply about them?... That has pushed me to be even more mindful and ethical about how I engage in the research process.

Tish noted that a collaborative and community-oriented approach impacted her research process and how she viewed research work. She said, "This is my work. My work that tells the story of my community. I owe it to them to tell our story, and ... tell the world who we are. Research is my way of celebrating my people."

Discussion

Given the pervasive role of cultural and relationship factors on the lived experiences of IDCSSs, we intentionally situate the discussion within an RCT framework. Participants in the inquiry shared their beliefs, challenges, and cultural strengths that shaped their lived experiences. The authors noted that participants in the inquiry made numerous references to their need to belong and connect in the mentoring relationship and the larger academia. Often these participants came in with a strong intention to grow and contribute to the mentoring relationship but were met with unexpected barriers. However, Clarisse felt that the lack of clear communication made the process much more challenging. Relatedly, Mustafa observed that there was little structure or dependability on his mentor's efforts during the mentoring process. He discussed his dilemma attempting to decode subtle social

norms within academia in the United States (e.g., who should initiate meetings).

These micro-incidents eventually build up, resulting in reduced trust and authenticity in mentoring relationships. When participants' efforts and intentions to belong and connect were not met, they reported feeling more isolated, and at times, even dejected. It is also worth observing that participants like Luna and Dale noted exceptions in their mentoring experiences and appreciated their mentors for being intentional and supportive throughout the relationship. They felt cultural factors such as respect, structure, and directiveness needed to be accounted for by mentors to make the mentoring relationship successful. This is in alignment with Miller (1976), who noted that mutual empathy and connection are needed for a healthy, growth-centric relationship. Extant counseling literature also indicates that when mentoring relationships are absent or weak, mentees may feel less confident or worthy (Anekstein, 2021; Cisneros et al., 2022; Rawls, 2008; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Harrichand, 2021).

Relatedly, a unidirectional expectation to adapt within academia often reinforced and normalized an individualistic and solipsistic culture, even if not explicitly stated by mentors. Several participants, including Isa who discussed her struggle with the English language, shared how the responsibility to adapt often fell on them, with limited acknowledgment from mentors. Isa shared that she often felt "stupid," given how much time it took her to comprehend research articles. Hayat recognized research writing in English often took several more hours of reading and planning. Participants were subtly pushed to handle these challenges privately, away from the gaze of their mentors. Echoing the findings by Briggs and Pehrsson (2008), participants in this inquiry insisted that mentors center the quality of the relationship in the mentoring process, pay attention to mentees' struggles, and meaningfully support them. While existing counseling research on mentorship discussed imposter syndrome (Borders et al., 2012; Wester & Borders, 2014), IDCSSs may experience an additional facet of internalized "incompetence"

based on the dominance and exclusive use of English. Failure to acknowledge and accommodate language could have significant academic and mental health consequences for IDCSSs, impacting their professional identity development (Borders et al., 2012; Interiano & Lim, 2018).

Furthermore, a culture of unidirectional expectations that emphasize mentees' adaptation may also rob mentors of a mutual and reciprocal relationship. It can be tempting and yet misleading to present mentoring relationships as beneficial only for the mentees. Extant research indicates that mentors can also grow and learn from mentees' worldviews and research interests (e.g., Borders et al., 2014; Cisneros et al., 2022). Miller (1976) and Jordan (2017) noted that for a healthy and sustainable relationship, both parties must actively engage in the process. Scholars within the counseling field (Cor & Chan, 2017; Duffey & Somody, 2011) also echoed these sentiments.

RCT scholars have emphasized the importance of considering systemic factors and social justice issues (Cor & Chan, 2017). In fact, the origins of RCT lie in the differential treatment of women in our society. Subsequently, other scholars have extended and applied the principles of RCT to better understand other marginalized communities (Cor & Chan, 2017). Participants in this inquiry frequently drew attention to how systemic and global factors shaped their research productivity and expectations from research mentors. Clarisse noted that arbitrary visa restrictions impeded her scholarly productivity. She couldn't attend an international conference because she feared not being able to return to the United States to finish her education.

Relatedly, while extant counseling literature notes the importance of mentors' cultural competence (e.g., Benishek et al., 2004; Borders et al., 2014), participants in the current study claimed that mentors' cultural competence must go beyond surface-level demonstrations and focus on genuine and trusting relationships. As Dale indicated, educational qualifications and achievements did not always translate into mentors' cultural competence. Furthermore, the emphasis and prioritization of domestic students often meant that IDCSSs were left

with fewer or no resources. Luna shared that many fellowships and scholarships were developed exclusively for domestic students. These barriers were compounded by xenophobic immigration policies that made it almost impossible for IDCSSs to secure paid internships outside of the college campus. Such social inequities often frustrated the participants, who, in turn, wondered if their mentors understood their challenges. Luna also questioned if mentors could advocate for them and help develop funds to attend national conferences. These narratives indicated that participants often looked to their mentors to connect and belong in the profession.

Lastly, we believe that while existing narratives of international students in counseling programs predominantly focused on their perceived deficits and challenges (Seyeneh, 2018), IDCSSs in the study presented several strengths and made unique contributions to the profession (e.g., a globalized approach to counseling research) that sought to culturally and intellectually advance research. Regrettably, some participants noted that few mentors made sincere efforts to deeply understand and incorporate their strengths and contributions. These behaviors are possibly reflective of the larger culture within the counseling profession, wherein an assimilationist approach is taken, insisting that minoritized communities adopt the practices of dominant cultures (e.g., English language).

Implications and Future Research

CES programs would benefit from creating a culture of authentic mentoring relationships that integrate IDCSSs' cultural context. Offering regular training and feedback opportunities for mentors can serve as a developmental approach helping them grow in their roles. Additionally, programs can develop committees to advocate for and focus attention on IDCSSs' issues while supporting their cultural adjustments and orienting them to higher education in the United States. Such committees can regularly seek feedback from current and former IDCSSs from the program, and offer specialized workshops such as research writing for non-native English speakers, and arrange for guest speakers

who have navigated visa-related challenges as part of their research development. Additionally, counselor educators offering research mentorship to IDCSSs must remain connected to current trends on academic needs and requirements in their mentees' home countries.

In keeping with IDCSSs' need for supportive research mentorship, mentors are called to intentionally advocate for IDCSSs regarding school and immigration policies and procedures at the institutional, state, and federal levels. Research mentors are encouraged to have clear instructions and communicate expectations in writing to demystify invisible expectations and minimize miscommunication. Finally, mentors can empower IDCSSs through collaborative research projects (e.g., conference presentations) and help them navigate and build professional networks (e.g., International Student and Faculty Interest Network within ACES).

In the context of these findings, we believe it is important for future researchers to investigate concrete ways in which counselor education in the United States mirrors and contrasts with other countries, better informing counselor education faculty and positioning them to tailor their mentorship when working with IDCSSs. Another avenue of future research can explore the advocacy initiatives that counselor education and the profession of counseling in the United States are exploring, and investigate ways to better support IDCSSs regarding mentorship possibilities and grant funding opportunities.

Limitations

Even with the important findings gathered from our research, several limitations were apparent that might impact transferability. First, we recognize our study relied on self-reports and did not capture the voices of all IDCSSs' in the United States, only those in CACREP-accredited programs, therefore, our recommendations are tentative in keeping with this limitation and applicable to counselor educators and administrators in programs similar to our participants. Second, interviews were conducted in

English, which was not the primary language for several participants, as such, language limitations may have prevented us from accurately capturing the entirety of their individual experiences. Lastly, the data was collected during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, possibly impacting IDCSSs' stress levels and their evaluation of their research mentorship experiences.



Conclusion

Our research highlighted the clear call by IDCSSs regarding their socialization and belonging in academia, power and systemic barriers, and mutuality and research. Equipped with these research findings, we believe counselor education faculty are uniquely positioned to change the narrative regarding IDCSSs' research mentoring through advocacy initiatives, such as international student committees, awareness of global affairs impacting IDCSSs, and research partnerships and projects. In so doing, counseling programs will develop stronger IDCSS researchers who are equipped to positively impact our profession in the United States and the world at large.



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Author Information

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

The authors reported that this research study was partially supported by an Excellence in Counseling Research Grant from Chi Sigma Iota, Counseling Academic and Professional Honor Society International.

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How to Cite this Article:

Anandavalli, S., Harrichand, J. J. S., & McCullough, R. (2025). Research mentoring needs of international doctoral counseling students: An interpretive phenomenological inquiry. *Teaching and Supervision in Counseling*, 7(3), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.7290/tsc07d9n6>