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Beyond the Standards: A Qualitative Analysis of Perfectionism Among Master's-Level Counseling Students

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Abstract

This study investigates how perfectionism in counselor training impacts the relationships between students and clients/supervisors and contributes to imposter syndrome, burnout, and social disconnection. Using a transcendental phenomenological approach, we explored the experiences of perfectionism among 13 master's counseling students during their graduate training. Four key themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) striving for enoughness, (b) masking inadequacy, (c) embracing vulnerability, and (d) connecting with authenticity. The implications of these findings for graduate training programs are discussed, emphasizing the specific needs of students grappling with perfectionism.

Significance to the Public

In counselors-in-training, perfectionism may undermine the working alliance with clients and supervisors and contribute to experiences of imposter syndrome, burnout, and social disconnection. This study examined the lived experiences of master's students related to perfectionism. Implications for graduate training programs are discussed.

Keywords: perfectionism, counselor training, graduate students, supervision, impression management

Counselors-in-training (CITs) are exposed to a unique combination of academic, clinical, and personal demands that often result in elevated levels of anxiety and burnout (Clarke & Hartley, 2023; Holden & Jeanfreau, 2023). CITs are expected to not only acquire knowledge, but also develop self-awareness and relational skills, engage in social justice and advocacy, and tolerate the stressors associated with being evaluated. The pressure related to fulfilling these responsibilities can produce self-doubt (Butts & Gutierrez, 2018), which can impede the counseling alliance and interfere with supervision (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003).

One factor that may increase CITs' vulnerability to these issues is perfectionism (Ganske et al., 2015; Gnilka et al., 2016). Perfectionism within

counseling is recognized as a multifaceted personality disposition, encompassing both adaptive and maladaptive factors (Stoeber, 2017). Some scholars have argued that perfectionism can be adaptive, characterized by high levels of motivation and hard work to meet reasonable standards of excellence (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). The maladaptive dimension of perfectionism, marked by excessive reliance on self-evaluation, severe self-criticism, and a persistent perception of failing to meet standards and expectations, has been associated with a detrimental impact on the working alliance with supervisors and clients (Ganske et al., 2015; Hewitt et al., 2003).

While the impact of perfectionism on college students has been well-documented in recent professional literature (Cowie et al., 2018; Doyle &

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Catling, 2022), the implications of perfectionism in CITs have yet to be the focus of significant research. This transcendental phenomenological study aimed to uncover the intricacies of how perfectionism is navigated within the unique context of counseling training, focusing on key themes, challenges, and potential areas for intervention. This article discusses insights into how perfectionism manifests among counseling students, providing a foundation for the development of practical training and supervision strategies for promoting the well-being and professional growth of CITs experiencing perfectionism.

Perfectionism and CITs

While perfectionism among graduate students has been associated with a range of negative constructs, including increased anxiety and depression (Doyle & Catling, 2022; Smith et al., 2018), diminished social connection (Barnett & Johnson, 2016), and academic difficulties (Cowie et al., 2018), research on the implications of perfectionism among counseling trainees remains limited (Ganske et al., 2015). To date, only two empirical studies have directly explored the effect of perfectionism in CITs. Ganske et al. (2015) examined the impact of perfectionism on the working alliance with clients and supervisors in a sample of 143 counselor trainees and 46 supervisor-trainee dyads. The researchers found a significant negative correlation between maladaptive perfectionism and the supervisory working alliance as perceived by supervisors, suggesting that behaviors such as concealing failures, avoiding intimacy, and struggling with vulnerability during evaluations may make the supervisee appear distant and disagreeable (Ganske et al., 2015). While this study did not establish a correlation between perfectionism and the working alliance with clients, subsequent research in a sample of 170 CITs demonstrated that maladaptive perfectionism negatively predicted the client working alliance (Gnilka et al., 2016). Given the pivotal role of the counseling and supervisory alliance in CITs' self-efficacy and satisfaction (Bordin, 1979; Park et al.,

2019), exploring factors that enable or impede their development is essential.

Several factors may contribute to perfectionism's detrimental influence on these pivotal relationships. Research has consistently demonstrated a link between perfectionism and elevated levels of stress and anxiety (Moate et al., 2016; Shafique et al., 2017). While a moderate amount of anxiety can enhance CITs' concentration and contribute to productivity, excessive anxiety impedes learning and growth and may contribute to burnout (Kuo et al., 2016). Perhaps in part for this reason, stress experienced by CITs has been found to negatively impact the supervisory alliance and hinder the formation and maintenance of therapeutic relationships (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019; Gnilka et al., 2016).

This finding is in line with previous research underscoring perfectionism's tendency to interfere with close relationships (Hewitt et al., 2006). Behaviors such as oversensitivity, hostility, and anticipation of rejection often contribute to perfectionists' perception of themselves as excluded and unable to meet others' expectations, resulting in a lack of belongingness and lower perceived social support (Smith et al., 2018). Inadequate social support is strongly correlated with burnout in helping professionals (Stanley & Sebastine, 2023); therefore, it is crucial to understand how to facilitate the development of protective factors before these students enter the workforce.

Stress and anxiety associated with perfectionism may also influence the classroom experiences of CITs. Perfectionism has been associated with imposter syndrome, wherein individuals fear being exposed as less competent than perceived (Cokley et al., 2018). In psychology trainees, perfectionistic cognitions were significantly and positively correlated with feelings of intellectual fraudulence (Tigranyan et al., 2021). Additionally, perfectionism has been named as a characteristic of white supremacy culture (Okun, 1999), partly because it contributes to a culture that holds individuals' work to an unrealistic standard set by those with the most privilege. In counselor education, where antiracist transformation and

meaningful engagement in social justice and advocacy work are the expectation, perfectionism may be a salient force undermining CITs' success. Students will inevitably make mistakes as they attempt to unlearn internalized bias; those who fear negative evaluation and feel they must consistently demonstrate mastery and certainty may struggle to engage with this process. For students of color, perfectionism is compounded by racism, creating an intense need to prove one's intelligence, ability, and worth (Raymundo, 2021).

The American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (2014) emphasizes the responsibility of counselor educators to address the personal development of CITs. Similarly, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2015) requires programs to attend to personal characteristics and behaviors that may influence the counseling process. Therefore, counselor educators and supervisors must understand the specific effects of perfectionism on CITs, including their impact on the therapeutic alliance, self-efficacy, and the ability to navigate the complexities of the counseling process effectively. This transcendental phenomenological qualitative inquiry marks an initial exploration into perfectionism within counselors-in-training, contributing to the existing literature by offering unique insights into this phenomenon. The research question guiding this study was: How do counseling students experience perfectionism in their graduate training? This study holds significant social relevance by addressing a crucial gap in the literature and shedding light on the nuanced challenges and strengths specific to this demographic. By exploring the intricacies of perfectionism in counselor trainees, this study aims to enhance the validity of interventions and support systems, ultimately contributing to developing more tailored and effective training approaches that meet emerging mental health professionals' unique needs.

Method

Given the absence of literature on the lived experiences of perfectionism among master's students in CACREP-accredited counseling programs, we selected transcendental phenomenology as the guiding framework for our data collection and analysis. Transcendental phenomenology is a methodology well-suited to describing the "essence" of participants' lived experiences when a phenomenon is being newly explored (Moustakas, 1994). This requires researchers to bracket assumptions, which allows for transparent reflection on the research data to gain deep insight and construct new knowledge (Husserl, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). While transcendental phenomenology assumes a postpositivist paradigm where the goal of research is description, explanation, and prediction (Clark, 1998), we view perfectionism as situated in sociocultural experience and identity; therefore, we had participants self-identify as perfectionists and asked them to define the construct during the interview process. Allowing participants to self-identify supported the study's aim to capture the richness and diversity of CITs' lived experiences, allowing for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how perfectionism manifests in the specific context of counselor education.

Participants and Procedures

After obtaining institutional review board approval, we employed convenience and purposeful sampling to recruit participants. The selection criteria included being a master's student in a CACREP-accredited counseling program, endorsing the experience of perfectionism, and being 18 years or older. Sampling in phenomenological research can be viewed as "choosing informants" (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 45), wherein participants are chosen based on their knowledge and ability to describe a group to which they belong (Van Manen, 2014). In order to access master's counseling students with lived experience of the phenomenon of perfectionism, we used recruitment flyers that were posted on our

social media pages and emailed to professional connections at CACREP-accredited programs, and posted a call for participants on the Counselor Education and Supervision NETwork listserv. The participants’ time commitment was 75–90 minutes, and they received a \$25 e-gift card after member checking. Multiple recruitment calls were made to draw a diverse participant pool; however, after reaching saturation, consultation with senior qualitative researchers concluded that deliberately targeting or calling for additional diversity would compromise the integrity of the organic sample. Thirteen counseling students participated in the study (see Table 1). Following Polkinghorne’s (1989) recommendation for phenomenological research, we considered the sample size sufficient once we achieved data saturation and consensus among the research team. The participants in the study were master’s-level counseling students, with ages ranging from 23 to 45 years ($M = 28$). All participants were in the southern region of the United States. Three participants had not yet engaged in their clinical field experiences.

Data Collection

After obtaining informed consent, data was collected through 60-minute semi-structured, audio-recorded Zoom interviews completed by the first and second authors. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to encourage participants to expand on the meaning of their rich first-hand experiences of perfectionism (Moustakas, 1994). The 10-question interview protocol focused on the influence of perfectionism on relationships, self-beliefs, and perceived performance, and included questions such as: (a) Describe how your perfectionism relates to your relationships with your peers or faculty, (b) Describe an experience in which you felt that it was necessary to conceal your flaws and perform perfectly during your training program, (c) What leads to and maintains your perfectionism?, and (d) Describe an experience in which you felt able to be vulnerable and make mistakes during your training program. The recorded interviews were de-identified and transcribed verbatim before data analysis.

Table 1
Participants Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender Identity	Race/Ethnicity	Spiritual/Religious Affiliation
Megan	23	F	Caucasian or White	Neither spiritual nor religious
Maureen	35	F	Caucasian or White	Christian/Catholic
Jill	45	F	African American	Christian/Catholic
Jesse	27	F	Caucasian or White	Christian/Catholic
Elizabeth	28	F	Caucasian or White	Spiritual but not religious
Gail	28	F	Caucasian or White	Christian/Catholic
Sophie	26	F	Caucasian or White	Christian/Catholic
Sam	25	F	Middle Eastern	Muslim
Chelsey	25	F	Caucasian or White	Spiritual but not religious
David	30	Genderqueer	Caucasian or White	Pagan
Ann	28	F	Caucasian or White	Christian/Catholic
Reed	24	F	Caucasian or White	Neither spiritual nor religious
Mary	23	F	Caucasian or White	Christian/Catholic

Data Analysis

The first and second authors followed an inductive coding approach to identify emerging themes and make meaning from participants' lived experiences (Saldana, 2021). During the first phase of data analysis, the researchers independently immersed themselves in the data by thoroughly reading each transcript. Horizontalization was then employed to identify significant statements and descriptive passages from the transcripts (Moustakas, 1994). The researchers then clustered these statements based on thematic similarities, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns and textural-structural descriptions. Themes that appeared in fewer than seven interviews were discarded to ensure themes were grounded in data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the second data analysis phase, the authors met to compile and organize similar themes across participants. This process resulted in a set of composite themes describing the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). To ensure rigor and minimize biases, these authors held weekly meetings to establish consensus (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015; Saldana, 2021). Additionally, the first author shared the identified themes with participants to verify that they were a genuine reflection of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Research Team's Positionality

The research team was comprised of a counselor education doctoral student (first author) and two counselor education faculty members (second and third authors) affiliated with a Research 1 CACREP-accredited institution. The first and second authors completed the study design, data collection, and analysis and generated the findings; the third author was selected as an auditor to increase credibility and aid in manuscript completion. In addition to their academic roles, the first and second authors are clinicians in private practice who frequently work with clients experiencing perfectionism. The first author identifies as a White woman, and the second and third authors identify as women of color. Before data collection, the first and second author explored their experiences and expectations related to

perfectionism, with the goal of maintaining reflexivity and minimizing bias in participant narratives (Husserl, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). During this process, we hypothesized that perfectionism might be associated with increased anxiety and negative self-talk, leading affected students to conceal their distress to the extent of experiencing isolation. In examining our backgrounds and potential biases, we acknowledged our own lived experiences encompassing (a) a strict and authoritarian upbringing, (b) cultural and familial influences, (c) heightened expectations, and (d) tendencies toward catastrophic thinking. We maintained reflexivity by engaging in continuous self-reflection throughout the research process, actively considering how our backgrounds might influence the interpretation of participants' narratives and shape the study's findings.

Trustworthiness

To bolster the trustworthiness of this study, we employed a multifaceted approach in line with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Initially, the first and second authors engaged in 12 reflective meetings, facilitating open discussions about their individual experiences, biases, and judgments related to perfectionism (Moustakas, 1994). Secondly, to aid in confirmability and dependability, the third author, an experienced qualitative researcher, was an auditor, abstaining from involvement in the data collection or analysis phases. The auditor cross-checked all 13 transcripts, validating textural descriptions, themes, and subthemes against the codebook and transcripts. Thirdly, themes were deemed reliable only if they manifested in at least seven different interviews, aligning with the guidelines proposed by Creswell and Poth (2018). Additionally, the research team employed various strategies, including bracketing, reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, investigator triangulation, and member checking, to fortify the study's trustworthiness and credibility. Member checks were conducted by clarifying statements during interviews (e.g., "Let me make sure I understand what you mean"). Participants were also

allowed to review and verify verbatim transcripts and preliminary findings.

Findings

Four main themes and three subthemes emerged, reflecting the experiences of counseling students with perfectionism in their training. The themes encompassed: (a) striving for enoughness; (b) masking inadequacy, including subthemes of social comparison, harsh self-evaluation, and impression management; (c) embracing vulnerability; and (d) connecting with authenticity. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities.

Theme 1: Striving for Enoughness

The first theme, *striving for enoughness*, encapsulates participants' multifaceted experiences in their counselor training. It goes beyond a binary perspective of success or failure, representing an ongoing journey of self-discovery within the fluid context of personal and professional development. Participants addressed how they reconcile their internal standards with the external demands of their training and described their perfectionism as a constantly shifting target. Jesse explained, "It can lead to really toxic thought patterns of, 'Okay, if I'm not perfect, then I'm not anything.' Never good enough, just always striving for perfectionism, and then even when you reach it, it doesn't feel satisfying."

In this theme, participants highlighted how early experiences of perfectionism, often rooted in factors like religious upbringing, parental expectations, and athletic identity, fostered a sense of safety and validation during childhood. For example, David described adopting perfectionism to avoid negative consequences in his religious upbringing: "For me, probably always being some level of achiever, I wanted nothing more than to obey the rules and keep my parents happy and keep God happy If you disobey, then God's mad at you." Sam shared how her academic performance in childhood was both a source of pride and a catalyst for criticism:

[My parents] came from [overseas] here, better life for their kids, my dad's a [professional occupation] and they've always wanted the best for us And so I remember from a very young age, [in] school, having a lot of pride and self-esteem coming from my grades. And coming home and being like, "I got an A," and they'd be like, "Oh, good job. Why didn't you get a 100?"

Participants turned to perfectionism as a coping mechanism to alleviate anxiety and seek certainty. This hindered their spontaneity and willingness to take risks, with concerns about appearing foolish or unprepared limiting their ability to embrace uncertainty. Maureen stated, "It happens [insidiously] like that, when I might know the answer to something and I'm just like, 'Well, I'm not certain so I'm just not gonna bring it up.'" Emotionally taxing behaviors, such as overpreparation and constant reliability, were employed to maintain an illusion of control. This desire for certainty was characterized by an intense focus on avoiding adverse outcomes and a strong desire for tangible achievements.

This theme further reveals that unsustainable expectations are deeply ingrained in participants' perfectionism. Participants prioritized perfectionism over self-care, portraying intricate dynamics where striving for perfection comes at the expense of life balance. Gail vividly described the complex dynamics of how perfectionism drives her goal achievement but comes at the cost of life balance:

I wish I wasn't so much of a perfectionist. It means that I don't sleep as much, and I don't have as much time for the things that I enjoy I wish I could care without feeling the need to strive quite so much.

This central theme of *striving for enoughness*, illuminates the complex interplay between perfectionism, childhood foundations, coping mechanisms, and the delicate balance between striving for professional excellence and the essential need for self-care among counseling students.

Theme 2: Masking Inadequacy

In the second theme, *masking inadequacy*, participants attributed their perfectionism to the fear of rejection, driving their ambition and desire for recognition. However, negative self-talk and rigid thinking patterns, such as black-and-white thinking, contributed to an anxiety cycle that affected their performance. Three subthemes emerged from this theme: social comparison, harsh self-evaluation, and impression management.

Social Comparison

Despite being novice counselors, all participants expressed a recurring theme of social comparison, characterized by self-talk centered around feelings of incompetence and inadequacy. Elizabeth provided an example: “I see other people doing the things that I think I should be doing. So, if they can do it, I should be able to do it, too.” Ann, Sophie, and Reed expressed how their experiences of social comparison with their peers triggered imposter syndrome and a fear of failure. Participants felt the pressure to constantly present themselves as academically, clinically, and socially competent, mainly due to the evaluative nature of assessments in their training programs.

Consequently, participants experienced social disconnection due to competitiveness and a fear of conflict. Sam explained this phenomenon: “I find it more intimidating to befriend someone who has it all together, they’re on top of their game. I’m like, ‘I don’t know if I wanna be friends with you and feel bad about myself the whole time.’” Participants highlighted heightened anxiety due to social comparison in courses involving experiential activities such as group counseling, counseling skills, or practicum. Chelsey shared an experience where this distress led her to overprepare in her group counseling course: “I remember feeling so nervous and so worried that I literally almost had a script of everything that I was going to say.” Reed spoke to an experience of social comparison in her practicum course:

[Comparing] myself to other people in the cohort, which I know you’re not supposed to do

but sometimes it’s hard. Like in my practicum class, we were assigned to post our direct hours and our recorded minutes and all that in a discussion board And like this is very much not in my control at all with clients not showing up [in counseling]. But then looking up like cohort members that are at [other sites] where they just get [more hours] They [can] see way more clients than I do. That was kind of difficult.

Social comparison among participants evoked self-doubt and self-criticism regarding their competence as counselor trainees.

Harsh Self-Evaluation

Participants discussed automatic negative thoughts associated with social comparison. Jesse described this as, “A lot of criticism. Self-criticism. It immediately goes inward, like, ‘What could I have done better? Why didn’t I get it right?’” Chelsey conveyed, “If I raised my hand and got an answer wrong, I would be so embarrassed and beat myself up, and be like, ‘You don’t need to talk during class anymore, don’t even participate.’” Participants demonstrated an overwhelming fear of incompetence, leading to rumination about perceived flaws and subsequent feelings of shame. Gail vividly described a distressing experience in her program, stating:

My professor was like, ‘How was that?’ And I was like, ‘That was horrible, I just felt so lost, and I didn’t know what to say.’ And I cried like for the rest of class, maybe like the next 30 or 40 minutes.

Reed and Sophie both shared their experiences of self-blame and catastrophizing. Reed expressed, “I automatically said, ‘Okay, well, I must have done it wrong. And so, I’m gonna fail this class and fail the program.’” Similarly, Sophie shared her immediate self-talk when faced with a client switching to another counselor, stating, “Well, they hate me. What did I do wrong? I’ve scared them off. I don’t know; I must have not connected with them.” These quotes demonstrate the participants’ tendency for self-blame and harsh self-judgment and their

utilization of impression management strategies to avoid rejection from academic and professional sources.

Impression Management

Participants' fear of vulnerability and the desire to impress others led them to engage in impression management. Jesse explained the high need to perform and impress faculty and supervisors, stating, "There's always someone watching you, and so there's always this need to achieve and perform." Participants learned from childhood that masking vulnerabilities and appearing effortless was a way to hide their efforts and achieve perfection. Sophie expressed the attempt to hide imperfections as well as her efforts, saying, "I don't wanna come across like I'm trying to do everything perfectly." Jesse added that working hard behind the scenes made it seem like her achievements came naturally when in reality, it required significant effort.

Sam described how her meticulous efforts to maintain an image of being put together and stress-free surprised her friends as they discovered her human aspects. She admitted to curating that image for those around her. This facade of effortlessness led to feelings of inauthenticity, hindered deeper connections, and resulted in avoiding attention in class and supervision. Mary's experience with a group project highlighted how her impression management was triggered by fortune-telling thoughts, causing significant time and emotional investment:

I was like, 'Well, will they get upset if I add something that's not good?' And I went and did my references like a hundred times over. And I woke up in the middle of the night thinking about it, too. So, it's been a lot; it has taken up a lot of my time.

The fear of rejection, fueled by social comparison, harsh self-evaluation, and impression management, shaped the nature of participants' experiences. However, participants also discussed how their perfectionism eventually evolved into embracing vulnerability.

Theme 3: Embracing Vulnerability

In this theme, *embracing vulnerability*, participants underwent a transformative shift in their relationship with perfectionism as they embraced vulnerability. This shift, facilitated through intentional self-work and supportive interactions, led to the emergence of openness and connection. Chelsey reflected on her journey, acknowledging the challenges of being transparent about vulnerabilities: "It's hard [to] be transparent about [vulnerabilities]. Even though I know in the back of my mind that if I say these things, someone can help, someone can give suggestions, someone can guide me in a way."

Participants grappled with imposter syndrome and perfectionism, hindering their ability to express authenticity and recognize their self-worth. Gail reflected on her experience, stating, "I was so scared of getting it wrong that I wasn't willing to try or admit the reality of what was happening I should have just stopped and asked for help." Masking vulnerability inhibited participants' ability to seek assistance, limiting their learning process and access to mentorship. Sophie emphasized the tendency to put on a smile and hide her true feelings, explaining, "You can still dress the part and fool people But on the inside, you can be feeling something completely different." Participants aimed to avoid burdening others and sought to evade attention and judgment by masking their vulnerabilities, preventing genuine connection. Mary expressed her struggle with asking for help, saying, "I will go to every extent possible before I would ask a peer It's like something is holding me back."

Participants experienced transformative moments when they embraced vulnerability, setting aside the mask of perfection and fostering meaningful connections. Jesse highlighted the power of vulnerability in building relationships, stating, "Vulnerability just breeds connection. And so, you really need it to become closer to people." By sharing challenges and imperfections, participants found validation and support. Jill shared her intense experience during a class presentation,

acknowledging the discomfort yet meaningful connection it brought:

“I [didn’t] want to go too deep. But I did. I did. I went extremely deep to the point where when I was presenting my PowerPoint and my paper [and] I was just boo hoo crying — like boo hoo. It was crazy. It was so intense. It was uncomfortable, it was scary, yet it was a moment where I connected with a lot of people in the class.”

Building trust with faculty, supervisors, and peers proved crucial in striking a healthier balance with perfectionism. Participants emphasized the significance of supervisors and faculty members sharing their own areas for growth and past struggles, allowing them to separate their self-worth from clinical performance. Gail mentioned the impact of supervisors being human and acknowledging their own mistakes, saying, “There is something really helpful about sharing just what’s going on in your life or acknowledging maybe a time you did something ... where you messed up.” Vulnerability became a source of support and resilience for participants as they navigated their professional journeys.

Theme 4: Connecting With Authenticity

In this theme, *connecting with authenticity*, participants found a powerful antidote to perfectionism by establishing meaningful connections with safe individuals, such as faculty members, supervisors, or peers. This connection served as a source of relief and support, enabling participants to navigate the challenges of perfectionism in their counselor training. Jesse exemplified this experience when she shared her vulnerability with her supervisor:

Quickly in supervision, I had to learn [it’s] okay to share with my supervisor that these cases are really affecting me, [that listening to this client content is intense], and if I wasn’t gonna be able to share that, then I wasn’t gonna be able to last in the field.

Within this theme, participants highlighted the crucial role of faculty and supervisors in creating a safe environment that counters perfectionism. Megan described her experience building safety with faculty: “They’ve shown me that they’re trusted enough that I’m not gonna feel like I have to really conceal much.” Participants valued structure, encouragement, validation, care, affirmation, and normalizing mistakes as part of growth. Elizabeth specifically emphasized the value of this approach, stating, “That helps, ’cause I know ultimately, the long-term goal is to grow and to learn, and if I don’t show the areas where I need to grow, then I’m gonna miss out on the opportunity to learn.” Gail had an “aha” moment when her professor emphasized the importance of connection over striving for perfection as a counselor. These realizations allowed them to embrace vulnerability and authenticity in their professional development, facilitated by the supportive environment provided by faculty and supervisors. Gail shared her realization: “That moment when my professor said, ‘It’s not about striving for perfection, it’s about connecting,’ was a game-changer for me.”

Participants recognized that striving for perfection was ineffective in counseling and embraced authenticity instead. Engaging in personal reflection to challenge negative beliefs, they accepted that imperfection is a part of the learning process. By connecting with faculty and supervisors, participants could let go of the constant pressure to please others and acknowledge the fluctuating nature of productivity. This shift allowed them to focus on their growth as counselors and prioritize meaningful work instead of striving for perfection. Jesse reflected on this change: “I’ve realized [being perfect is] not how counseling works, and that’s not the best way to be a good counselor.”



Discussion

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the multifaceted impacts of perfectionism on the development of counselors, revealing intricate

dynamics that extend beyond a mere pursuit of excellence. While participants acknowledged the potential benefits of perfectionism in driving achievement, the findings illuminated profound emotional disturbances, disconnection, and feelings of inadequacy. This duality aligns with existing literature underscoring the emotional toll perfectionists pay for their elevated performance (Shafique et al., 2017).

A crucial revelation for counselor educators and supervisors is the observed phenomenon of impression management among perfectionistic students. As supported by previous research (Hewitt et al., 2003), participants tended to prioritize managing their image and presenting themselves flawlessly. This inclination becomes particularly pronounced in the high-pressure environment of a professional graduate program, where students are compelled to showcase competence (Clarke & Hartley, 2023) and are often trained using a cohort model where social comparison may be pronounced. The adoption of impression management serves as a protective mechanism, allowing students to shield themselves from vulnerability and the perception of incompetence. However, the implications of this behavior on authenticity and genuine connection within the counselor role warrant careful consideration.

Participants underscored the importance of clear and supportive feedback from faculty and supervisors in fostering openness within their professional training. This aligns with existing research indicating that structured environments with clear success metrics can benefit perfectionistic counseling trainees (Ganske et al., 2015). The capacity to mitigate perfectionistic tendencies was notably evident in positive supervisory experiences where mentors modeled vulnerability and professional resilience, providing consistent, supportive feedback rather than criticism. This finding is in line with previous research suggesting that modeling vulnerability in supervision is supportive of relational connection and CIT growth (Stargell et al., 2020). Consequently, participants felt more connected to their mentors and program, alleviating the distress

caused by perfectionism. These findings emphasize the critical role of mentorship in shaping the experiences of perfectionistic counseling trainees, offering insights into practical strategies for fostering a supportive learning environment.

Consistent with previous research suggesting that there are positive aspects of perfectionism (Stoeber & Otto, 2006), participants acknowledged the potential advantages of perfectionism in facilitating achievement and accessing opportunities. Perfectionistic tendencies were associated with an ambitious drive for excellence, propelling participants to excel academically and professionally. This ambition translated into tangible accomplishments and the ability to seize opportunities for growth and advancement. Moreover, participants noted that their perfectionism gained approval from authority figures, creating a reinforcing cycle of meeting expectations and providing service to others. This intricate interplay between perfectionism and external validation raises questions about the potential long-term impact on the mental health and well-being of counselors, as constant validation through perfectionistic tendencies may come at a significant personal cost.

As counselor educators and supervisors navigate the complexities of addressing perfectionism, recognizing and harnessing potential positive aspects is crucial. Encouraging a balance that fosters achievement while mitigating the emotional toll associated with perfectionistic tendencies become paramount. The findings prompt a deeper exploration into the potential long-term consequences of perfectionism on the overall well-being of counselors. Acknowledging the dual nature of perfectionism allows educators to tailor interventions that promote healthy ambition and resilience in counseling trainees, ensuring a holistic approach to their professional development.

Implications

The study's findings underscore the impact of perfectionism on CITs, highlighting the necessity for tailored interventions to address their specific

training needs effectively. Given the reported high levels of stress and anxiety among CITs (Clarke & Hartley, 2023) and ethical guidelines emphasizing the personal development of supervisees (ACA, 2014; CACREP, 2015), prioritizing attention to perfectionism in students is crucial. We offer practical suggestions for supervisors and counselor educators to address and alleviate perfectionism in CITs.

Teaching and Supervision Strategies

Initiating active discussions about perfectionism and unveiling related coping mechanisms is vital, especially since perfectionistic students may conceal their struggles due to impression management. Providing specific and supportive feedback, fostering a growth-oriented mindset, and emphasizing self-reflection and self-compassion can assist perfectionistic students in acknowledging their strengths and overcoming the fear of failure (Wolcott, 2022). Additionally, integrating learning experiences that build resilience to uncertainty and normalize mistakes as a part of development may cultivate autonomy, self-regulation, and enhanced mental well-being in perfectionistic students.

More specifically, teaching and supervision must consider cognitive factors in combating perfectionism, including ruminative response style, perfectionistic automatic thoughts, and core irrational beliefs about competence and worth (Flett et al., 2018). Guiding CITs in reflecting on their perceptions of success and failure may encourage a more realistic view of the learning process and foster self-compassion in facing challenges. The following questions can serve as starting points: “Considering your role as a CIT, are there beliefs about making mistakes or facing challenges you must address? What do you tell yourself during moments of perceived inadequacy? How do you engage in reflection when faced with challenges or moments you perceive as failures? Are there patterns of self-criticism, and how might cultivating self-compassion support your growth as a counselor? How can setbacks be reframed as valuable learning experiences?”

Educators and supervisors can aid perfectionistic students in identifying and challenging negative thought patterns, such as “I’m terrible at this and made a mistake thinking I could ever be a counselor,” and replacing them with more balanced and useful beliefs like, “There’s not one correct way to do counseling, and this skill must be practiced to improve over time.” Strategies such as collaborative goal setting, regular check-ins, and breaking tasks into manageable steps have also been found to foster progress-oriented perspectives (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019).

We also recommend exploring what failure looks like as a counselor. The following questions may probe societal expectations: “As a CIT, how do you define success and failure in counseling, and what standards or expectations do you need to meet? Are these expectations useful and attainable, and how might perfectionistic tendencies impact your self-perception? What does failure look like? How do your current habits align with a risk of failure?” Questions exploring pressures to prioritize conforming to societal and white supremacy culture ideals (Okun, 1999) over authenticity may include: “How have societal expectations played a role in your experiences of sharing your authentic self? Do specific social norms or pressures you feel impact your willingness to express vulnerabilities? How do you challenge fears of rejection? How can you reframe these expectations to prioritize authenticity over conforming to societal ideals?”

Questions about the CIT’s own experiences of seeking help and concerns about authentic self-presentation encourage reflection on societal expectations and the role of vulnerability. This reflective process aims to dismantle misconceptions about being burdensome and promotes authenticity in self-expression, acknowledging that perfection is not a prerequisite for seeking help. Guided questioning can help the CIT examine their misconceptions about feeling burdensome in help-seeking (e.g., “When reflecting on your experiences of seeking help or support, do you notice any fears or concerns about being perceived as burdensome? How might these concerns influence your ability to express your needs authentically?”) or any authentic

presentation of self that isn't positive, helpful, or humorous ("Considering the societal emphasis on perfection and positivity, how do you navigate fears or anxieties about not meeting these expectations? How can you challenge the notion that vulnerability or struggles are burdensome to others?"). These reframed questions may encourage the CIT to reflect on their help-seeking experiences, addressing fears of being perceived as inadequate and troublesome due to not conforming to societal expectations of constant positivity.

Additionally, behavioral experiments can be designed to help perfectionistic students confront and change maladaptive behaviors associated with perfectionism. For instance, counselor educators can assign some students to create the most appropriate or "perfect" response to a client's prompt in class. In contrast, another portion of students can be instructed to generate as many responses to the same client prompt in the allotted time. Following this exercise, group discussion can demonstrate how experimenting with various responses can create more robust outcomes than focusing on the one "right" answer, highlighting the strengths of experimenting in counseling versus engaging in black-and-white beliefs about "good" and "bad" counseling. Shifting focus from perfectionistic outcomes to perceiving clinical work as an ongoing and fluid learning experience may diminish the impact of perfectionism.

Perfectionism's positive correlation with burnout and secondary traumatic stress in counselors (Holden & Jeanfreau, 2023) underscores the necessity of fostering protective factors before CITs enter the workforce. Integrating self-care, self-compassion, social connection, work-life balance, and realistic expectations into the curriculum helps students develop healthier perspectives and attitudes. Introducing the concept of "unproductive" activities within and beyond supervision aids in appreciating moments of play and spontaneity, counteracting compulsive striving patterns (Egan et al., 2016). Supervisors should also remain aware of available resources, such as counseling services or workshops on perfectionism, facilitating timely referrals when necessary. By embracing these

considerations, counselor educators and supervisors may effectively guide perfectionistic students, fostering resilience, mindfulness, and self-compassion while mitigating potential adverse effects on personal and professional development.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Limitations must be acknowledged for accurate interpretation. Firstly, participants self-identified as perfectionists, using subjective definitions. Future research should incorporate established measures like the Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Scale (PSPS) for objective categorization. Secondly, the sample was predominantly young, White, Christian females, limiting diversity. Future studies should intentionally include diverse samples, exploring intersections of cultural, ethnic, racial, gender, ability, and class identities in shaping perfectionism, especially for students with marginalized and historically harmed identities.

Limited diversity, with only one participant identified as a student of color, impacts generalizability and depth. The experiences of individuals from different backgrounds may not be adequately captured, particularly affecting marginalized or underrepresented students who may face additional pressures. Future research must intentionally recruit more diverse participants to understand perfectionism in counseling students comprehensively. In addition, the study's semi-structured interview methodology introduces potential limitations related to question framing, wording, and presentation, influencing participants' responses. Future studies should address these considerations for enhanced reliability and validity.

The research team's perspective also shapes the interpretation of findings, with alternative interpretations possible from different teams. The predominance of negative impacts within the study's findings may stem from participants' focus on challenges associated with perfectionism in counseling training. Individuals identifying with perfectionism may be more attuned to its negative aspects. Demands and expectations in counseling

programs may accentuate negative consequences, creating a stressful, competitive environment. The emphasis on vulnerability and authenticity may also illuminate the incongruence between perfectionistic tendencies and expectations, causing internal conflict. However, the negative impacts reported do not negate the potential beneficial aspects. Future research could explore the balance between valuable and problematic effects, providing a more comprehensive understanding of perfectionism in counselor training.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this qualitative study sheds light on the intricate dynamics of perfectionism among counseling students. Striving for enoughness, masking inadequacy, embracing vulnerability, and connecting with authenticity influenced counseling students' training experiences. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, it was evident that while perfectionism contributes to CITs' measurable achievements, there is an adverse impact on students' lives, including their well-being, academic performance, and professional development. The findings underscore the need for targeted supervision, teaching interventions, and support mechanisms within counseling programs to address perfectionistic tendencies effectively. By fostering self-compassion, promoting realistic expectations, and providing guidance on managing perfectionistic tendencies, counseling programs and clinical sites can help cultivate resilient future professionals better equipped to navigate the challenges of this demanding field.

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