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Abstract

In their training efforts, counselor educators focus on a variety of characteristics, including cognitive complexity (CC). Cognitively complex counselors can identify and integrate the multiple characteristics and perspectives of their clients and have been found to be generally more empathic and accepting of ambiguity (Castillo, 2018; Granello, 2010; Welfare & Borders, 2010b). Although CC is considered to be an integral counselor attribute (Castillo, 2018), how CC may be related to within-program peer interactions has yet to be explored. Through this convergent mixed methods study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), we sought to understand how participants' (n = 7) experiences with and assessments of their counseling peers may help explain the quantitative differences between participants' levels of CC, using the Counselor Cognitions Questionnaire (Welfare & Borders, 2010b). Qualitative findings reveal that counselors in training assess their peers according to their professional abilities, developmental tasks, and perceived similarities and differences with them. Level of CC was found to be positively associated with perceptions related to peers' developmental levels.

Significance to the Public

Researchers have found that for counselors, cognitive complexity is related to greater empathy and various other important constructs (Castillo, 2018). Using a sample of seven counselors in training, we conducted a mixed methods study to better understand how participants' experiences with and perceptions of their counseling peers may explain their levels of cognitive complexity. These findings have implications for improving counselor training and supervision for the benefit of diverse clients.

Keywords: cognitive complexity, counselor development, counselor training

Cognitive complexity (CC) is an increasingly studied construct marked by positive associations with integral counselor attributes such as empathy, acceptance of ambiguity, and multicultural competence (Castillo, 2018; Gantt-Howrey & Kemer, 2023; Ober et al., 2009). Granello (2010; p. 92) defined CC as “the ability to absorb, integrate, and make use of multiple perspectives.” Counselors with higher levels of CC have been found to engage in less stereotypical thinking (Chung & Bemak, 2002) and express more accurate understanding of their clients (Blocher, 1983). These findings, along with the suggestion that CC may be positively related to the development of multicultural competence (Martinez & Dong, 2020), support

continued calls for exploration of CC development in counselors in training (CITs; e.g., Castillo, 2018; Gantt-Howrey & Kemer, 2023). There is also an imperative for counselor education programs to train multiculturally aware counselors who are competent in eight core areas identified by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2024). More specifically, researchers have made clear the need to understand characteristics, skills, and behaviors that describe cognitively complex CITs and means of enhancing CC (Castillo, 2018; Gantt-Howrey & Kemer, 2023; Granello, 2010; Welfare & Borders, 2010a).

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Underpinning the work of counselor educators is the belief that CITs can and should increase in their CC as they develop throughout the counselor training programs (Castillo, 2018; Welfare & Borders, 2010a). Much of the extant counseling and counselor education literature on CITs' CC and its development is founded upon the work of developmental theorists such as William Perry (1970; Wilkinson & Dewell, 2019). Perry's theory is based on more than a decade of research conducted on college students' intellectual and ethical development and includes nine positions encompassed by four categories: dualism, multiplicity, contextual relativism, and commitment in relativism (Perry, 1970). Perry suggested that through education, individuals progress from more dualistic, or concrete, ways of thinking, toward thinking that embraces relativism and the ability to embrace the possibility of other answers and ideas (Granello, 2010). Compared to dualistic thinking, multiplistic thinking includes greater acknowledgment of both ambiguity and varying opinions; individuals in the multiplistic stage of thinking may seek to find "right" answers and appeal to authority figures' desires. Progressing into relativism, individuals become accepting of ambiguity, begin to form their own identities, and tend to take more information or context into consideration when making decisions (Perry, 1970).

Researchers have suggested two components of CC: differentiation and integration (Welfare & Borders, 2010a; Wilkinson & Dewell, 2019). According to Welfare and Borders (2010b), within their client conceptualizations, counselors identify a quantifiable amount of client information (differentiation), and then form connections amongst those pieces of information (integration), informing practical responses, such as treatment planning. Thus, the CC of CITs increases alongside their propensity for differentiation and integration (Welfare & Borders, 2010b), as also reflected in the multiplicity and relativism stages of Perry's theory (1970). Wilkinson and Dewell (2019) suggested that counselor training programs seek to move CITs toward more relativistic ways of thinking through focus not only on differentiation, but the integration of client information through reasoning skills.

Through this study, we sought to understand how participants' experiences with, and assessments of, their counseling peers may help explain the quantitative differences between participants' levels of CC.

Cognitive Complexity and Counselor Training

Various studies support CC as a counselor construct that may increase developmentally as one progresses through their counselor training and gains experience (Granello, 2010; Ridley et al., 2011; Sias et al., 2006; Welfare & Borders, 2010a). Such training by nature includes personal and professional interactions with peers in training programs. Given suggestions that there is a relationship between CC and multicultural competence (Castillo, 2018; Martinez & Dong, 2020; Ober et al., 2009), exploring how counselor educators might leverage inevitable peer relationships to support the enhancement of CC and thereby multicultural competence is warranted. Additionally, researchers have more widely studied CC in a general sense (without use of a counseling-specific assessment), so there remains a need for further exploration of domain-specific CC, distinct to counseling and counselors' cognitive development (Welfare & Borders, 2010a).

To address the need for a counseling-specific measure of CC, Welfare and Borders (2010a) developed the Counselor Cognitions Questionnaire (CCQ), an empirically validated assessment of counselor CC that considers both differentiation and integration. Welfare and Borders (2010a) utilized the Role Category Questionnaire (RCQ; Crockett, 1965) as a foundation for format and scoring for the CCQ. The RCQ requests respondents describe a peer they like and a peer they dislike (Crockett, 1965). Participants in Welfare and Borders' (2010b) validation study completed both the RCQ and the CCQ for comparison of participants' complexity concerning peers and clients using solely differentiation scores given the nature of the RCQ. Not obtaining a statistically significant correlation between participants' RCQ and CCQ scores, they suggested there was a difference between how

participants thought about their peers and clients, further highlighting the domain-specific nature of counselor CC.

Researchers have also called for exploration of specific experiences and counselor qualities that may promote the enhancement of CC (Castillo, 2018; Gantt-Howrey & Kemer, 2023; Granello, 2010; Welfare & Borders, 2010a). These understandings would inform counselor training and supervision efforts to enhance CC, better preparing future counselors to engage in the complex, often ambiguous, work of counseling with clients who are different from themselves. Counselor educators may also use information on how CC develops throughout the training program to inform admissions and remediation efforts. Despite counselor educators' frequent use of group interactions and teaching methods, and CITs' often close relationships with one another in multiple capacities, researchers have yet to explore CITs' peer interactions and assessments in relation to CC.

There remains a gap in understanding how specific experiences may influence counselors' CC (Castillo, 2018; Granello, 2010; Welfare & Borders, 2010a). Welfare and Borders (2010b) recommended that researchers gather information on counselor experiences within educational settings. Similarly, Castillo (2018) calls for researchers to examine andragogical methods to effectively increase CC and encourages increased use of the CCQ (Welfare & Borders, 2007) in counselor training programs. After conducting a meta-analysis of the CC literature, Woznyj et al. (2020) also recommended continued study of CC in relation to social interactions and specifically noted the consideration of social context. CITs' perceptions of their peers in the context of the counselor training environment may parallel CITs' views of their clients.

The two domains of CC, differentiation and integration, have been the focus of researchers' attention in relation to phenomenological teaching methods to increase CC (Wilkinson et al., 2020). Phenomenological teaching methods concern subjective experiences and move "beyond abstractions" (Wilkinson & Dewell, 2019, p. 321). Wilkinson and Dewell (2019) suggested various

phenomenologically based practices aimed at increasing CC in counseling practice, counselor training, and supervision, many of which may be implemented in group settings, whether in the classroom or in supervision. Researchers have suggested capitalizing on the diversity within student cohorts to teach and integrate multicultural counseling concepts (Chun et al., 2020; Glass & Westmont, 2014). Particularly, program cohorts with diverse student bodies could expose CITs to different perspectives, life experiences, and values, expanding on the complexity of their thinking in relation to the course materials as well as client conceptualization. Granello (2011) described the concept of contextual teaching and learning in counselor education and suggested that this sort of situated learning could occur through counselor educators' efforts to "replicate" counseling situations in the classroom. This may occur through role-plays and other student interactions (Granello, 2011). However, even with the literature's consensus on CC as an integral counselor attribute, exploration of CITs' assessments of their peers, and how such assessments and interactions may relate to CC, have yet to be explored. We sought to address this gap and expand the CC literature through the present study.

Purpose of the Study

There remains a need for increased understanding of CITs' CC beyond quantitative measures based solely upon client conceptualizations. Gaps include how specific program experiences and perspectives relate to CITs' CC. This convergent mixed methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) exploration of CITs' level of CC *alongside* their experiences with and conceptualizations of their counselor trainee peers is meant to provide further understanding of what it means to have a high level of CC. This exploration moves beyond the solely quantifiable characteristics of CC, highlighting the role of specific CITs' experiences and perspectives with or of their peers that might contribute to a high level of CC. This study can inform counselor educators and supervisors in creating learning environments most conducive to increasing CITs' CC. Findings may

also inform program admissions processes, such as applicant interview procedures and required admissions materials. Therefore, through this mixed methods study, we sought to answer the following research question: How do CITs' experiences with and perspectives of their counselor trainee peers help explain the quantitative differences between their levels of CC?

Method

We utilized a convergent mixed methods design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) to explore how CITs' experiences with and perspectives of their peers may indicate their level of CC. For this design, Creswell and Creswell (2017) recommended quantitative and qualitative data collection procedures to occur respectively, but independent of one another, with equal priority given to each. For this study, use of both types of data allows for a more comprehensive understanding of CITs' peer perceptions to inform CC more comprehensively, providing context not provided by quantitative measures alone. Additionally, in the present study, use of a convergent design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) allows us to consider participants' conceptualizations of their peers more deeply through comparison of qualitative and quantitative data that are given equal weight in the analysis process.

Participants

Using purposeful criterion sampling (Patton, 2014), we ensured participants met the following criteria: (a) over the age of 18, (b) enrolled in an in-person CACREP-accredited master's program in the Southern Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (SACES) region, (c) completed a master's-level multicultural counseling course, and (d) enrolled in internship. We determined the criteria to ensure that participants had completed a similar coursework according to CACREP, prior to entering the practice-based portion of their training (i.e., internship). We recruited CITs specifically from CACREP programs within the SACES region,

given consideration of potential cultural and values differences across the United States; future replication of this study may allow for comparison of how CITs conceptualize their peers between regions. Furthermore, given that all participants were in internship, they could reflect upon multiple semesters of experience with their peers and had a chance to engage in thought-provoking discussions throughout their training, including completion of a multicultural counseling course. Table 1 displays participants' demographic characteristics. We assigned each participant a pseudonym.

Procedures

Following IRB approval, we recruited participants from CACREP-accredited clinical mental health counseling programs in the Southern United States, as defined by SACES. We utilized various means of recruitment, including announcements to the researchers' social media accounts (e.g., LinkedIn and Facebook), the Counselor Education and Supervision Network and COUNGRADS listservs, and emails to the CACREP liaison of each program in the SACES region. As participants met the participation criteria based on their answers to the demographic questionnaire, we contacted them by email to schedule a 1-hour, semi-structured interview conducted by one of the first two authors. Next, participants completed the CCQ, taking 15 minutes according to the assessment protocol provided by Welfare and Borders (2007). Finally, participants engaged in a semi-structured interview consisting of three predetermined questions.

Data Collection Instruments

We used the following means of data collection, detailed below: (a) demographic questionnaire; (b) the CCQ; and (c) a semi-structured interview.

Demographic Questionnaire

Prior to answering any demographic questions, participants were provided an informed consent via Qualtrics and agreed to participate in the study. In addition to demographic questions, participants

Table 1

Participants’ Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Ethnicity	Religion	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation
Stephanie	25–34	White	Not Hispanic	Roman Catholic	Female	Asexual
Samuel	25–34	White	Not Hispanic	Atheist or agnostic	Male	Gay
Michael	25–34	White	Not Hispanic	Protestant	Male	Gay
Krista	35–49	White	Not Hispanic	Roman Catholic	Female	Straight
Gemma	25–34	Black or AA	Hispanic or Latino	Buddhist	Female	Straight
Maggie	25–34	White	Not Hispanic	Evangelical Christian	Female	Straight
Maya	18–24	White	Not Hispanic	Evangelical Christian	Female	Straight

were provided this prompt: “Think about **three** other students in your master’s program who you believe you know best or are closest to. Please describe how you are **similar to** and **different from** these individuals.” We included this prompt to ensure that participants were able to describe at least three students in their counselor training program in detail, meaning with at least three similarities and three differences.

*The Counselor Cognitions
Questionnaire (CCQ)*

We obtained permission via email from the creator of the CCQ to use the instrument for research purposes. The CCQ is a domain-specific measure of counselor CC (Welfare & Borders, 2007) that aims to encourage thorough client conceptualizations from counselors (Welfare & Borders, 2010b). Firstly, participants are asked to think of two counseling clients: one whom they believe they were effective with and another with whom they believe they were less effective. Next, participants are asked to list client characteristics in a table, separately, for each client. For each characteristic, a plus sign, meaning the characteristic is mostly

positive, or a minus sign, meaning the characteristic is mostly negative, is to be selected. Next, the perceived importance of the characteristic from a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high) according to the counselor should also be selected. Finally, for each client, the counselor is asked to sort the characteristics into categories and label each category. The counselor creates or names the categories. We thoroughly followed the CCQ scoring protocol provided by Welfare and Borders (2007), including training for those who will rate the CCQ prior to completing the scoring for this study.

The CCQ is the first validated instrument intended to measure counselors’ CC through consideration of their thoughts about their clients. Welfare and Borders (2007) utilized the input of expert counselors and counselor educators, as well as a pilot study, to ensure psychometric sufficiency of the instrument. They reported that the CCQ was psychometrically sound and suggested three main pieces of evidence in support of the validity and reliability of the CCQ: the positive, moderate correlation between CCQ differentiation and integration; the fact that individuals with master’s degrees scored higher on the CCQ than trainees;

and the CCQ's inter-rater reliabilities of .99, .96, and .95 across trained CCQ raters. Following completion of the CCQ, participants were asked to email the responses to the interviewer to ensure each participant had the same amount of time to complete the questionnaire (Welfare & Borders, 2007).

Interview

Next, we asked participants the following predetermined interview questions, recorded via Zoom:

1. Please describe the cultural makeup of your program as a whole.
2. In the demographic questionnaire, you answered a question about the three fellow counseling students you are closest to or spend the most time with. Please explain more about how you are similar and different, and how your relationships are influenced by your identity similarities and differences.
3. Think of three students that you are not close to or do not spend much time within your program. Please describe how you are similar and different. How are your relationships influenced by your identity similarities and differences?

The interviews were then transcribed for coding purposes. We developed the interview questions based on our review of the CC literature. Starting with asking participants to describe the cultural makeup of their program was strategic for the purposes of the study in two ways. We wanted to prompt participants' reflections on the diversity of their program with special attention to their peers, in addition to helping them make a focused transition to the questions that followed in the interview protocol. Prior to recording, the interviewers reminded each participant that the interviews would be recorded, permanently deleted after transcription, and anonymized to protect confidentiality. Interviewers utilized the Zoom "waiting room" feature to ensure that only the

interviewer and participant were in the meeting, in an effort to protect participant confidentiality. Participants were asked to verbally confirm their consent to participate and were given the opportunity to withdraw from the study.

Data Analysis

Through this mixed methods design, we intended to gather a more comprehensive understanding of CITs' CC based on participants' experiences, perceptions, and personal characteristics through integration of data from different sources (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007). Quantitative data from the CCQ and qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed independently and then merged for comparison (Venkatesh et al., 2013). The merging of quantitative data from the CCQ with the subjective experiences of participants from semi-structured interviews mirrors the work of the counselor and provides rich, dense data from a small group of participants (Ponterotto et al., 2013). In other words, similar to how counselors seek to conceptualize and integrate data from multiple data sources (e.g., tests, assessments, unstructured interviews), we used mixed methods data collection to garner a more thorough explanation of CITs' CC and peer perspectives. We conducted the following steps for the data analyses: (a) scored the CCQs according to the procedures described by Welfare and Borders (2007); (b) calculated differentiation scores for participants' peer descriptions following CCQ protocol; (c) analyzed the interview data through thematic analysis (TA; Braun & Clarke, 2006); (d) integrated the quantitative and qualitative data through comparing correlations; and (e) interpreted the findings.

Quantitative Data

Following completion of data collection, the first two authors scored the CCQ according to the steps described by Welfare and Borders (2007), including completion of the training exercises to increase inter-rater reliability. Final interrater reliability was .90, meeting the cutoff suggested by Welfare and Borders. The data obtained from the CCQ scores

captured information about participants' client conceptualizations. In addition to quantitative data collected from the CCQ, we utilized the CCQ scoring instructions for differentiation to score participant interviews. This differentiation score provided data about participants' peer conceptualizations. Our purpose in including this data is to explore the potential association between client (from CCQ) and peer (from interview) CC and provide further insight on the differences between participant CCQ scores.

Qualitative Data

The coding team, consisting of the first two authors, analyzed the interviews using TA to identify and describe patterns in the experiences and perspectives of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To increase trustworthiness, the coding team engaged in bracketing, or "setting aside prior explanations of phenomena," personal values, assumptions, and biases, to the degree possible, prior to beginning the study (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 50). We engaged in bracketing before beginning and throughout the research process, as described by Chan et al. (2013); we individually engaged in mental preparation, including reflexive thinking, and collaborative discussions concerning our expectations and potential biases (Chan et al., 2013). These efforts toward greater self-awareness informed the data collection and analysis processes, as we sought to ask open, rather than leading, questions and set aside our own expectations during data analysis. We also conducted member checking by sending participants a copy of their interview transcript and requesting them to alert us of any edits or amendments they would like to make; no participants requested any changes. Then, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps for TA, the coding team familiarized themselves with the data by reading through each participant's interview transcript, attempting to observe patterns and themes. The team individually determined codes based on the entirety of the qualitative data and then compared codes. Coming to a consensus on the coding book, the team collaborated to identify themes, and reviewed and defined the themes. The

coding team discussed each theme until they reached consensus, meaning each coder agreed with the theme and its description. Finally, the third author, who had not been involved in any data collection and/or analyses, served as an external auditor. The external auditor was a tenured associate professor of counseling specializing in supervision of counselor and supervisor trainees. The external auditor offered five items of feedback concerning theme titles. To increase trustworthiness, we maintained an audit trail as we sought to provide thick, rich descriptions of participants' experiences in this article (Hays & Singh, 2012). Interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai, an online transcription software, and then manually checked by the first and second authors. To protect participant confidentiality, we promptly replaced names with pseudonyms, deleted any identifying information shared during the interview (e.g., university name), and immediately deleted video recordings upon transcription. We used participant pseudonyms to connect the different pieces of data.

Data Integration

To better make sense of the individual differences between participants' CCQ scores, we integrated the quantitative and qualitative data. First, the frequency of respective participant quotes for each theme were determined. The themes included: (1) CITs make assessments about their peers' personal and professional qualities and choose who they spend time with; accordingly, (1a) CITs hold similar perceived professional values as the peers they perceive themselves as close to; (2) similarities and differences across upbringing, educational background, and past/current life experiences; (3) life stages and relevant tasks; and (4) challenges and growth.

For example, Participant 1 is represented by nine quotes from their interview in Theme 1. The quantification of qualitative data provided numerous benefits (Monrouxe & Rees, 2020), underscoring patterns, and thereby meaning within the data, as well as the frequency and strength of findings (Neale et al., 2014). Neale et al. (2014)

provided five suggestions for reporting quantitative information from qualitative data, such as reporting data in a way that allows for participant comparison, avoiding the use of percentages with a sample less than 50, and providing justification for the use of quantifying terms like *most* or *minority*. For this study, quantifying the TA findings allowed us to explore possible relationships between or explanations for a CIT’s level of CC and their perceptions of and experiences with their counselor trainee peers. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated with an alpha level of .05 using SPSS Statistical Package for the Social Sciences to assess the linear relationships between participants’ integration CCQ scores, differentiation CCQ scores, and overall CCQ scores, with each participant’s mention of the five themes/subthemes from the TA.



Quantitative Results

Table 2 displays the participants’ CCQ differentiation, integration, and total scores, based

on client conceptualizations, as well as their peer description differentiation scores based on the interviews.

A higher differentiation score refers to a greater number of identified constructs about a peer or client, while a higher integration score refers to a more complex conceptualization of the aforementioned constructs (Welfare & Borders, 2007). Welfare and Borders (2007) provide an example of low cognitive integration as a client description that just includes basic categories like “good” or “bad.” A client description with a higher level of integration would include a more complex consideration of different types of categories, such as the counseling relationship, sociopolitical issues, family dynamics, and religious beliefs. We computed a Pearson correlation coefficient to assess the linear relationships between participants’ CCQ differentiation scores and peer description differentiation scores. Although positively correlated, a significant correlation was not found at the .05 level, $r(5) = .23, p = .621$.

Table 2
Differentiation and Integration Scores

Participant	CCQ Differentiation Score	CCQ Integration Score	Total CCQ Score	Peer Description Differentiation Score
Maya	21	10	31	73
Stephanie	10	7	17	16
Krista	23	13	36	43
Michael	15	6	21	101
Gemma	22	13	35	49
Samuel	23	18	41	43
Maggie	8	4	12	38

Note. Peer description differentiation and CCQ differentiation scores were calculated the same way, although the CCQ concerns participants’ client descriptions, rather than peer descriptions.

Qualitative Results

TA yielded four themes and one subtheme:

1. CITs make assessments about their peers' personal and professional qualities and choose who they spend time with; accordingly,
 - (1a) CITs hold similar perceived professional values as the peers they perceive themselves as close to;
2. Similarities and differences across upbringing, educational background, and past/current life experiences;
3. Life stages and relevant tasks; and
4. Challenges and being stretched.

Theme 1: Peer Assessments

Each participant made assessments about the values, behaviors, and thought processes of their peers, negatively and positively. Maggie stated that they and all their peers get along because they are all “caring, compassionate, [and] considerate.” Maggie also shared that what they believe “bonds” themselves and their peers together is the “consideration that [they] give for others and the care and respect that [they] give to each other.” This theme describes participants' experiences of assessing their peers' personal and professional qualities, and then making decisions about whom they spend time with according to these assessments. Samuel described the peers they spend the most time with as similarly introverted, while spending less time with more extroverted peers who “like being out and around other people ... clubbing, going out, going to bars.” Various participants described empathy as a similar characteristic amongst themselves and their peers, especially those they reportedly spent more time with.

Regarding participants' assessments about peers they tend to spend less time with, more negative qualities were shared. For example, when

describing a peer who “gets under [their] skin,” Maya stated:

She's just a lot to be around. Sometimes, a lot of the time, she's very nosy, she wants everyone to tell every little, every little bit of their livelihood. But I just think her experience has made her want to just lay everything out on the table, you never know, when's your last breaths gonna be like, I don't want to waste a moment. Like, I want to know everything about you. And it can be very overwhelming.

Michael described their assessment of a peer's fundamental value differences:

She is like a big Christian ... she's very much a zealot and very vocal on her social media platforms about being very pro-life, very Republican, very Trump supporting and it's really confusing to me 'cause like I grew up around people like that so like I know them, and I don't think that she's a bad person, I just don't feel safe when I'm around her.

Following this statement, Michael described himself as open to and accepting of diverse people, though troubled by thinking that seems absolute, reportedly such as that of the peer described previously. Michael also noted the potential that their peers' thinking is influenced by their parents, as the peer lives at home.

Subtheme: Similar Perceived Professional Values

Beyond making assessments about the personal and professional values of their counseling peers, participants described how these values directly relate to their own values. For example, Maya stated that they perceive themselves to be close to peers who are similarly ambitious and organized, while they tend to not desire to be close with their peers who they perceive as not having a similar work ethic to their own, having stated:

One thing that I think that really keeps me from getting to know them better is I've had to work with them on projects, and they're just not there. They don't do much. They're super kind, great

people, but they just don't have that drive, that same ambition.

Stephanie stated that they have similar opinions as their closer peers regarding their professors, counseling program, and mentors. Finally, Samuel summarized this subtheme through their description of peers they do perceive themselves as close to: "I'm drawn towards them because we have similarities and ideals around professionalism, boundaries and feedback and bracketing."

Theme 2: Similarities and Differences

Theme 2, *similarities and differences across upbringing, educational background, and past/current life experiences*, describes participants' perceptions regarding how they believe they are similar to and different from their peers. All participants noted various similarities and differences. Krista highlighted a shared military background amongst themselves and peers, noting shared values:

All four of us have some sort of military affiliation So, I think our military connection kind of joined us up a little bit We're driven by our love of children and wanting to make the world a better place for them and understanding that school is always safe; home isn't always safe ... to provide that kind of nurturing environment.

Michael expressed a similar sentiment: "We both had abusive dads, which is just interesting how people who had traumatic childhoods ... kind of gravitate toward one another."

Concerning what participants shared about peers they perceived themselves as *less* close to, Samuel noted differences in educational abilities which contribute to distance between himself and his peers:

My classmates struggle to read polysyllabic words If they're presenting, and they're struggling with a word in their own presentation, for me, that would have been addressed in my previous education And so I guess it's an

assumption that they're of a less rigorous educational background.

Samuel also noted "seemingly obvious" differences to include "education, opportunities, [and] privilege, which have given me both competency and confidence."

Theme 3: Life Stages and Relevant Tasks

Theme 3, *life stages and relevant tasks*, highlights participants' emphasis on age, developmental level, and the tasks associated with their life stages. Participants noted either their similarity to or difference in age to most of their peers. Describing a peer they view themselves as less close to, Maggie shared: "She's very warm, very empathic. So, in that way, she's very similar, I think, but just in a very different life stage." Maggie also described a peer they are less close to as "great ... [although] just in a different stage of life." Maggie stated a desire to be closer to some of their older peers but believed the older peers "are just incredibly busy; they have kids and a job and a husband, and we just don't get to see much of them."

Samuel described their perception that peers whom they are less close to may lack in "professionalism" due to their age, "and that kind of aligns with the whole lack of professionalism — the younger students still being right out of college and acting [unprofessional] like that." Meanwhile, Krista explained their experience as an "older" student in the counseling classroom, and how that influences their ways of thinking:

There are a couple of older folks in the room, and we tend to be a little dyed in the wool as far as our thoughts, philosophies and beliefs about the world and the way we view it. But there's a difference between being rigid and fluid and being able to bend yourself a little bit and some of those folks are a little too rigid for me.

Theme 4: Challenges and Being Stretched

The final theme, *challenges and being stretched*, describes participants’ perceptions on how their thought processes are challenged, or stretched, by their peers. Michael shared that they are from a small town lacking in diversity, “so it’s interesting now to be in this environment where everybody’s different, and we still have so much in common.” Michael described being in a diverse environment as “fun” and “invigorating,” given that they reportedly learn from one another; however, although the process was enjoyable, Michael also described being cognitively *stretched* through interactions with peers unlike themselves or those they grew up around. Other participants, like Stephanie, also highlighted benefits of engaging with different students: “We come from very different backgrounds, actually, so it’s an interesting perspective ... one [peer] comes from an Islamic background, and another is African American, and I’m White And so it’s nice; like I said, it gives perspective.” Samuel shared their perspective concerning strength through diversity amongst the peers they perceive themselves as close to, stating, “What draws us together is a diversity within our

own group of our own strengths. We have complementary strengths amongst a little group of three.” Samuel described the unique strengths of their peers, such as book smarts and application of counseling techniques; Samuel noted how their peers help them grow and develop when needed, such as in organization and “reality checking.”

Meanwhile, Samuel also noted their experience as a gay man in a woman-dominated counseling program, highlighting some benefits of this experience: “That has been the biggest benefit I get out of this - getting the female perspective, particularly with clients and client issues, and a lot of things just being unknown to me also, because I’m gay.”

 Data Integration

We computed Pearson correlation coefficients to assess the linear relationships between each participants’ differentiation, integration, and total CCQ scores and the frequency of their interview quotes for each theme, displayed in Table 3, to better understand how a participant’s level of CC may or may not be related to each theme/subtheme

Table 3

Pearson Correlations

		Theme 1	Subtheme	Theme 2	Theme 3	Theme 4
Differentiation Score	Correlation	.324	.122	.579*	-.649*	.349
	Significance	.478	.792	.173	.116	.442
Integration Score	Correlation	.159	.546*	.262	-.493	.431
	Significance	.733	.205	.571	.261	.334
Total CCQ Score	Correlation	.261	.312	.456	-.601*	.397
	Significance	.572	.490	.304	.154	.377

Note. All correlations were two-tailed and conducted with an alpha level of .05. *Moderate correlation (i.e., >/.50) **Weak correlation (i.e., </.20)

No significant correlations were found at the .05 level. However, researchers have suggested the importance of reporting interpretation of effect size and other observable findings when yielded results are nonsignificant (Visentin et al., 2020). We chose to follow the suggestion of Visentin and Hunt (2017) to report effect size alongside p-value. Of the 15 correlation coefficients calculated, 4 correlations were found to be moderate based on effect size as described by Cohen (2013), meaning between .5 and .8. Two of the moderate correlations (differentiation and Theme 2 [similarities and differences across upbringing, educational background, and past/current life experiences] and integration and Theme 1 Subtheme [CITs hold similar perceived professional values as the peers they perceive themselves as close to]) were positively correlated. Differentiation and Theme 3 [life stages and relevant tasks] were moderately and negatively correlated. The moderate correlation between Total CCQ Score and Theme 3 was negative, meaning as overall CCQ score decreased, so did participants' mention of items related to Theme 3 in their interview.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how CITs' experiences with and assessments of their counseling peers help explain the quantitative differences between their levels of CC. No statistically significant association was found between participants' CCQ differentiation scores and their peer differentiation scores; this echoes Welfare and Borders' (2010a) findings, further suggesting the domain-specific nature of counseling CC and need for CC-focused pedagogy and supervision efforts. Welfare and Borders noted that CC in *one* area does not mean there is similar CC in *another* area; hence, CC is domain-specific. In other words, regarding the present study, a participants' high CC concerning their peers *does not* mean they will have a high level of CC concerning their clients. Qualitative findings revealed participants' propensities to make assessments and assumptions about their peers in numerous capacities. These

findings also pointed out their focus on developmental differences, value differences and similarities, and related challenges. Illuminating the *what* and *how* of CITs' conceptualizations, these findings helped explain their differences in level of CC and extended beyond solely quantifiable understandings to provide a foundation for utilizing peer interactions to enhance CC.

Participants shared that they make assessments about their peers' personal and professional qualities, influencing who they associate with more closely. While the idea that anyone makes judgments and chooses friends accordingly is neither novel nor surprising, it may provide new insight for how counselor educators can leverage peer interactions and relationships to enhance CC. Participants highlighted benefits of interacting with peers who are different from themselves, and researchers have suggested the importance of leveraging classroom diversity and context to support CITs' training efforts (Chun et al., 2020; Glass & Westmont, 2014; Granello, 2011); these findings support the need for counselor educator initiative in highlighting and encouraging reflection on the identities, values, and experiences of the students in their classrooms.

The moderate, negative association between total CCQ score and Theme 3, *life stages and relevant tasks*, suggests that more cognitively complex CITs take the developmental levels and associated tasks of their peers into consideration. This finding was also in line with Borders' (1989) description of CITs' cognitive development marked by greater awareness of oneself and others. In other words, more cognitively complex participants saw beyond themselves in describing their peers. Assuming that counseling CC may be enhanced by in-classroom efforts, support of CITs identifying and reflecting on developmental differences within the counseling classroom may be apt. Moreover, research suggests that CITs with higher levels of CC display greater multicultural competence (e.g., Castillo, 2018; Ober et al., 2009). Given these findings, it is unsurprising that participants reflected on their peers' ways of thinking, beliefs, and associated developmental levels. Participants also made assumptions related

to beliefs, ways of thinking, and values related to their peers' ages. Additionally, the subtheme *CITs hold similar perceived professional values as the peers they perceive themselves as close to*, highlights the participants' propensities to spend time with, value, and perceive themselves as closer to peers whom they perceive as having similar professional values and abilities. Similarities include bracketing of biases and professionalism. As integration is marked by an ability to connect and make sense of different characteristics (Welfare & Borders, 2010a), the moderate association between integration and the subtheme may suggest that participants made assumptions based on their perceived professional values, thus more often experiencing closeness with those to whom they believed they are similar. With counselor educators often utilizing small-group discussions and CITs' dyads for skill training and other learning objectives, CITs' propensities to engage with those more similar to themselves may serve as a barrier to increasing tolerance of ambiguity, multicultural competence, and, overall, ability to engage with clients who are different than themselves in several capacities (e.g., culture, values, beliefs).

Differentiation was moderately associated with Theme 2, highlighting similarities and differences concerning life experiences and upbringing, and Theme 3, concerning developmental differences across the life stages. Considering that many counseling programs employ a cohort model, we may assume that CITs are influenced by their peers, both personally and professionally (Chun et al., 2020; Granello, 2011). Integration's moderate association with assumptions related to *professionalism*, compared to differentiation's associations regarding life experiences and developmental differences, may suggest that those with a higher integration ability may be more likely to consider professional or counseling-related attributes when determining close in-program relationships. Perhaps CITs with higher integration abilities further enhance their counseling skills and conceptualization abilities through interactions with their peers; however, CITs' assessments of their peers' professionalism may be biased and inaccurate, leading to a lack of diversity in their

relationships and interactions. Variables like education and years in the counseling field have also been suggested as predictors of CC (Granello, 2010; Welfare & Borders, 2010a); the current findings provide new insight into how views of and experiences with others *within* the counselor training program may influence level of CC.

Implications for Counselor Educators and Supervisors

Our findings yield implications for counselor educators and supervisors pertaining to enhancing CITs' CC. Findings suggest the importance of students identifying and conceptualizing the values, beliefs, and cultural identities of their peers. Assuming such identification and conceptualization occurs through time spent together, counselor educators are well-positioned to leverage this fact through program administration and in-class perspectives. For example, programs can make concerted efforts to recruit students of diverse backgrounds (e.g., age, race, life experiences, religion) so that cohorts reflect diversity in terms of various cultural identities, life experiences, and perspectives. Diverse cohorts may encourage, and perhaps require, CITs' interaction with more diverse perspectives throughout the training process.

In the classroom and in supervision, peer relationships can be used to teach counseling abilities related to CC through purposeful encouragement of large and small-group dialogue amongst students of different backgrounds. In a skills course, CITs may be asked to practice broaching culture with clients by asking each other specific questions about their important cultural identities, such as "How does your sexual orientation influence how you see the world?" Supervisors can provide opportunities for sharing about and discussing identity differences in individual and triadic supervision capacities. Encouraging collaborative inquiry (Castillo, 2018) and other constructivist and phenomenological practices (Wilkinson et al., 2020) utilizing CITs' own identities and experiences may serve to enhance CC and other related constructs, such as

empathy. Differences amongst CITs can be connected to the counseling relationship as CITs are prompted to consider what it *feels* like to engage with a peer who is different from themselves and connect how those differences may influence a counseling relationship.

Limitations and Future Research

Various limitations of the current study must be considered. These findings should not be interpreted as generalizable to all other populations, and our small sample size should also be noted. Future studies should recruit larger, more diverse samples and replicate the study with different groups of interns, like students from different regions of the country and of particular groups, such as from religiously affiliated CACREP institutions. Most of our participants were White, female, and between the ages of 25 and 34; thus, understanding of the experiences of more racially diverse, younger, and older CITs, for example, could yield a more robust understanding of how in-program CIT peer experiences could be related to CC development. Exploring the experiences of CITs from historically marginalized backgrounds (e.g., trans individuals) may yield a unique understanding of how peer relationships form and influence the development of CC. Other limitations include the potential influences of researcher biases and the general limitations of mixed-methods design. With a mixed-methods design, researchers risk potentially giving greater focus to the quantitative end of the study, which may diminish the voices of participants (Ponterotto et al., 2013). Future areas of research also include the creation and testing of teaching methods that engage group differences within the counseling classroom. Additionally, given that many participants judged various aspects of their peers' abilities as less than their own, future studies may consider how negative perceptions of others and higher view of self, whether accurate or inaccurate, may be related to CC and client outcomes.

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