EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-YEAR MASTER’S DEGREE COUNSELING STUDENTS:

A GROUNDED THEORY

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Abstract

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EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-YEAR MASTER’S DEGREE COUNSELING STUDENTS: A GROUNDED THEORY (222 pp.)

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This qualitative investigation examined first-year counseling students’ experiences during their first year in a graduate counseling program. Nine first-year students participated in two rounds of face to face individual interviews and six students participated in a focus group in order to ascertain the experiences of first-year master’s degree counseling students and to develop a tentative theory grounded in the students’ reports. Responses suggested that first-year students went through a constructivist sense-making process which was based on previous experiences as well as personal expectations in order to understand and make sense of their experience.

Four major themes emerged from participants’ responses that shed light on the various factors that affected students’ understanding and ability to make sense of their first year as counseling students. The four main themes were influences, meaning-making, knowledge conceptualization, and competence appraisal. As students reflected and discussed their experiences, it was evident that they had progressed and continued to move through a process whereby the four identified factors were integrated into an existing frame of reference. A discussion of each round of data collection, analysis, and triangulation is provided. The comprehensive, yet tentative, grounded theory is fully described. Implications for counselor educators, including specific
pedagogical strategies are provided. Additionally, implications for counseling students and future counselor development research are also included.

Approved:

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Chapter I

Introduction

Counselor educators and researchers alike have agreed that understanding the concept of development, including the factors that influence one’s own development as a counselor-in-training, is both important and necessary for healthy counselor development (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Morrissette, 1996). Accordingly, Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) stated, “It is, in fact, intrinsically appealing for therapists and counselors to understand the elements that contribute to their own professional growth and development” (p. 505). Further, gaining awareness into one’s personal feelings, thoughts, and perceptions, as well as knowing how one is perceived by others, is very important for the development of counselors (Hulse-Killacky & Page, 1994).

Student-counselor development is an important research area within the profession of Counselor Education and begins once students start a counseling graduate program regardless of the specialty track (e.g., School Counseling, Community Counseling, and/or Rehabilitation Counseling). Moreover, counselor educators play a significant role in student-counselor development (Spruill & Benshoff, 1996). By understanding how counselors-in-training develop on an interpersonal and intrapersonal level, counselor educators can design appropriate educational experiences to facilitate healthy counselor development (Furr & Carroll, 2003). Furr and Carroll (2003) also suggested that it is important to identify and examine factors that influence student development to gain a better understanding of their experience. Given the fact that development spans the entire continuum of professional training and continues
throughout one’s career, it is important to begin to examine development during the first year. This sentiment is echoed by Morrissette (1996) who stressed the importance of understanding the development of counselors-in-training. This researcher wrote, “Overlooking these needs and issues can have significant implications for both counselors and the clients they serve” (p. 39). Therefore, given that the counseling profession is largely based on a developmental perspective, one can see the importance of examining student development during the first year of academic training. By doing this, students can gain recognition of the importance of understanding and reflecting on their own development as counselors. Furthermore, counselor educators can gain perspective and a better understanding of the experiences of the first-year students to aid in facilitating healthy student-counselor development.

Researchers have conceptualized student-counselor development in a variety of different ways. When conducting a search on student-counselor development, five primary themes emerged from the literature. These issues include themes and critical incidents in student development and counselor development (Cormier, 1988; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Morrissette, 1996; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992), theories on how students learn (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; McAuliffe, 2005), the importance of counselor reflection (Griffith & Frieden, 2000; Manthei, 1997; Schon, 1987), the promotion of cognitive development and complexity (Brendel, Kolbert, & Foster, 2002; Etringer, Hillerbrand, & Claiborn, 1995; Fong, Borders, Ethington, & Pitts, 1997; Granello, 2001; Granello, 2002; Lyons & Hazler, 2002), and pedagogy in Counselor Education (Fong, 1998; Granello, 2002; Granello & Hazler, 1998; Guiffrida, 2005; Nelson & Neufeldt,
1998). Currently, these issues are the most prominent in providing counselor educators an understanding of the multitude of factors influencing the experiences of counselors-in-training.

Student-Counselor Development in Counselor Education

It is important to begin looking at students’ first years in a counseling program because most research investigated by this author illustrates that counselors-in-training begin to develop their professional identity during their training (Auxier, Hughes, & Kline, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). It is interesting to note that although researchers have testified to the importance of understanding student development, there is little research that has explored the issues associated with student development within the first year of a graduate program. For the purposes of this paper, the terms first-year master’s degree counseling student, first-year counseling student, first-year graduate student, and first-year counselor education student will be used interchangeably.

There are very few published articles and books that include personal accounts of students’ experiences in terms of critical incidents and student-counselor development. Furr and Carroll (2003) define a critical incident as “a positive or negative experience recognized by the student as significant because of its influence on the student’s development as a counselor” (p. 483). Critical incidents have also be defined as, “events that in some way greatly influence who we are and what we do” (Cormier, 1988, p. 131).

Skovholt and McCarthy (1988) introduced an issue of Journal of Counseling and Development that included a number of personal accounts describing critical incidents and how they served as catalysts for counselor development. When describing students at
early stages in their development the researchers stated that, “The authors repeatedly tell us that their ‘readiness’ to learn played a large part in whether or not an event became a critical incident for them” (p. 69). They suggested that “The interaction between the nature of an event and the readiness of the individual to accept the challenge to be ‘educated’ results in counselor development” (p. 69). This statement is a testament to the need for future research to make connections with students early in their development as counselors. This article only provides anecdotal evidence regarding critical incidents and counselor development through examples such as “cross-cultural lessons” and “finding a counseling niche.” Another limitation includes the fact that the critical incidents were defined as significant life experiences. By stating this, the researchers may have indirectly limited the experiences described to individuals who have professional experience. This may exclude students who went directly from high school to undergraduate training and then to graduate school without any breaks in academic training. Moreover, although the researchers stated that critical incidents can happen over the life course, most of the articles illuminated counselors’ experiences with clients. Thus, these experiences may not resonate with first-year students who have little to no professional training or experience.

Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) spoke with individuals ranging from their first year in a graduate program to individuals who were 40 years post graduate training to examine themes in their development. Through the use of qualitative semi-structured interviews, the researchers identified characteristics common to first-year graduate students. Themes associated with first-year students included the assimilation of
information from many sources, a sense of being overwhelmed due to the interaction between new and old sources of influence, an uncertainty of practice and theory, an urgency to learn conceptual ideas and techniques, and measurement of effectiveness by visible client improvement. While these themes are interesting to note, they do not cover the wide spectrum of possibilities that first-year counseling master’s students may be experiencing. Additionally, there was no distinction between the psychology students and the counseling students who were interviewed. Given the importance of professional identity in the counseling profession, it is imperative that we recognize and comprehend the counseling students’ experiences and not lump their experiences alongside the psychology students. Moreover, understanding the unique experiences of counseling students enables the counseling profession to expand its understanding of the development of their own counseling students rather than relying on the developmental research in the psychology literature.

Similarly, Morrissette (1996) conducted preliminary research regarding recurring critical issues of student counselors. Identified issues included (a) burnout, (b) becoming emotionally overinvolved with clients, (c) clinically-based issues including competency-based and supervision-based anxiety, (d) student-supervisor conflict and student-client conflict, (e) student-group competition, (f) trauma, and (g) personal values and ethics. While these categories highlighted some areas of interest, the methodology in the study was based on informal conversations and observations, which only provides anecdotal evidence for the investigated phenomenon. The author also grouped master’s level and doctoral level counseling psychology students together which causes a lack of clear
understanding of exactly what the first-year master’s students were experiencing in addition to the fact that they were not counseling students, but rather counseling psychology students. Again, while counseling psychology students may share similarities with counselor education students, it is important for the counseling profession to understand the experiences of counselor education students.

Auxier, Hughes, and Kline (2003) used qualitative methodology to conceptualize the experiences of counseling master’s students as they developed their identities as counselors. The authors explicitly stated, “A deeper understanding of the identity development of master’s level counselor education students can help counselor educators provide education and supervision that are more sensitive to students’ developmental experiences” (p. 26). This statement is a testament to the importance of talking directly to the students and being able to connect their experiences to the research, as well as their future in their graduate programs. Furthermore, the authors revealed that when students began the program, they expected traditional teaching styles that included lectures, papers, and tests. As they developed through the first year, they were able to identify those conceptual learning activities as useful. However, Auxier et al. interviewed students in the second year of their two-year program. While this has advantages in terms of the students having more experience with reflection and a likely capability to articulate their experiences, it does not take into account the first-year experiences directly from first-year students. Also, the authors noted that the process of development, as well as engaging in informed dialogue, is only possible with further exploratory research (Auxier). More exploratory research would continue to identify the array of possibilities
and experiences that are taking place for first-year counseling master’s students and for counselor educators to develop curriculum and learning experiences to meet the first-year students’ needs.

Beginning counselors-in-training are exposed to a variety of different tasks as they experience their first year in a master’s degree counseling program such as learner-focused teaching paradigms, experiential exercises, and videotapes of their counseling skills. As students experience their first year, they have a wide variety of experiences that can influence their success as counseling students, as well as future professional counselors. With these insights, counselor educators can understand the factors that can lead to positive student-counselor development. Additionally, having students articulate their experiences will give them an opportunity to begin to reflect on their experiences at an early point in their development, which is an important foundational element to counseling (Griffith & Frieden, 2000). Having first-year students reflect and articulate their own personal experiences during that first year may afford them the opportunity to recognize critical incidents that can better facilitate their own professional and personal development. It is important to provide these opportunities to enhance professional and personal development because students are more likely to be engaged in their learning when they are active participants in the social construction of knowledge and have the autonomy to be involved in knowledge creation (McAuliffe, 2002).

Counseling students enter into a graduate program and experience their first year with varying ideas and perceptions of counseling and the counseling process. Further, students who enter counseling programs come from various academic backgrounds, such
as psychology, sociology, and education, as well as personal backgrounds such as going
directly from undergraduate training to graduate school versus working first before
returning to graduate school. This research has provided the profession with rich
information regarding different constructs associated with how counselors develop.

*Students’ Perspectives*

What is remarkably lacking in the literature are students’ accounts of their own experiences. Much of the research is directed towards counselor educators in terms of the best pedagogical techniques, the differences between novice and expert counselors, or how to best promote cognitive development and increase cognitive complexity. The majority of the articles written about counselor development provide anecdotal accounts from professors or unrelated literature as to how students develop. For example, Etringer et al. (1995) cited evidence for differences in memory and knowledge structures from Anzai (1991) and Chi, Bassok, Lewis, Reimann, and Glaser (1987) that examined how “experts and novices differed in solving physics problems. They found that experts organized problems according to underlying abstract physical principles (e.g., the First Law of Thermodynamics), whereas novices used literal or concrete cues to categorize the problems (e.g., grouping together all of the equations that contain velocity) and missed important elements of problem presentation or meaning” (p. 5). While this information is useful for understanding the differences between novice and expert physics students and can provide a basic framework in which counseling students might fit, such as the differences in conceptualizing and understanding information, it does not provide
information that is directly grounded or connected to the experiences of first-year counseling students.

With such a notable element missing from the puzzle, how are counselor educators to understand what students are experiencing and how they as professors, or the program itself, is influencing student development? This piece of the puzzle can provide counselor educators a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing student-counselor development within the first year in a counseling program. Moreover, this information can be used to revise and tailor curriculum and learning experiences to better suit the developmental needs of first-year counseling students.

Statement of the Problem

The literature and research on counselor development has repeatedly emphasized the importance of understanding the factors associated with professional and personal growth as counselors develop. Additionally, research has stated that it is important to understand students’ experiences in counseling programs so that counselor educators can best facilitate their development (Granello, 2002). There is also support for counselor educators to gain a rich understanding of counseling students’ experiences, so they can match their pedagogical techniques and sequence classes to fit the developmental stage of the students (Granello & Hazler, 1998). A number of articles have provided anecdotal evidence that student development is important to understand in terms of sequencing counselor education classes and understanding how students develop; however none have been grounded in students’ actual experiences, providing an area in which systematic research is needed. Qualitative research will provide the profession a better understanding
of first-year counseling students which can result in the provision of more effective learning experiences and refined pedagogical strategies.

\textit{Purpose and Research Question}

The purpose of this study was to conduct exploratory research to qualitatively investigate first-year counseling students’ experiences during their first year in a graduate counseling program. This was achieved by using actual students’ experiences rather than the current practice of using anecdotal information that is most prevalent in the counselor education literature. More specifically, the purpose of this study was to describe the experiences and perceptions of students as they experienced their first year in a counseling program. The outcome of the proposed study was the development of a tentative theory grounded in the students’ actual reports describing their experiences during the first year in a counseling program. Consequently, the central phenomenon written as a research question was:

“What are the experiences of being a first year counseling graduate student?”

\textit{Significance}

Research that expands the understanding of the factors influencing student and counselor development will benefit students, educators, and researchers within the profession of counselor education by providing research grounded in students’ reports of their experiences. Moreover, the literature supports the need to conduct qualitative research with actual counseling students. The existing literature also groups together counseling students with psychology students which does not provide information solely from counseling students. Therefore, this exploratory study employed grounded theory
procedures that will progressively developed into a tentative theory grounded in the students’ experiences. The theory developed from multiple rounds of interviews and interactions with students. According to Strauss and Corbin, grounded theory allows the researcher to “get out into the field to discover what is really going on” (1998, p. 9). It refers to a process in which the purpose is discovering concepts and relationships in the raw data and then organizing those relationships into a theoretical explanatory scheme. Therefore, grounded theory is “likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12).

In implementing a grounded theory approach, the tentative theory that emerged was based entirely on the participants’ responses regarding their experiences as first-year counseling master’s students. The findings can add to a deeper understanding of first-year counseling students’ experiences. The theory generated from this study provided useful information regarding a connection to students’ reports of what is actually going on. Additionally, the findings provided information valuable for spurring further research in student-counselor development, generating ongoing dialogue, as well as improving pedagogical techniques within the field of counselor education.

limitations and delimitations

As previously stated, a grounded theory approach was utilized. Grounded theory operates from a postpositivist perspective; therefore the tentative theory generated from this proposed study will be limited in terms of its generalizability. Further, the sample size was quite small in comparison to sample sizes in quantitative studies. These factors, though, are not appropriate for the methodology and do not follow the philosophical
assumptions of qualitative research (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). One should note that in
some qualitative research, sample sizes are larger to account for representative data;
however for the purposes of this research, purposeful sampling will be employed which
enables the researcher to purposefully select “information-rich” cases ranging in
diversity. This type of sampling is conducive for the development of a tentative grounded
theory and will be discussed further in chapter three. Another limitation that might be
noted is the issue of reproducibility. From a positivist standpoint, the issue of
reproducibility is quite important in terms of credibility. In qualitative research,
reproducing social phenomena can be difficult “because it is nearly impossible to
replicate all the variables that might possibly affect findings” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.
266). However, Strauss and Corbin noted that, “given the same theoretical perspective of
the original researcher, following the same general rules for data gathering and analysis,
and assuming a similar set of conditions, other researchers should be able to come up
with either the same or a very similar theoretical explanation about the phenomenon
under investigation” (1998, p. 267). Issues associated with credibility, as well as the
researcher’s methods to maintain credibility will be discussed further in chapter three.

Other limitations inherent with a grounded theory approach include the author
selectively choosing evidence that supports the theory, cleaning up the subjects’
statements, unconsciously adopting value-laden metaphors, assuming omniscience, and
boring the reader (Richardson, 1994). Charmaz (2003) stresses that the “researcher’s
disciplinary and theoretical proclivities, relationships and interactions with respondents
all shape the collection, content, and analysis of data” (p. 85). As the researcher was
developing category names, including both the conceptual and contextual categories, personal and professional influences could have biased the labels chosen to describe the categories.

The researcher kept in mind these criticisms while moving forward with the belief that the emphasis on building an inductive tentative theory grounded in the students’ experiences provided an understanding of the reality that existed between the researcher and the participant (Charmaz, 2003). Given these limitations, the knowledge generated from this study may not be generalizable and should remain context-bound.

It is also important to mention a limitation to conducting the following literature review in chapter two. According to Maxwell (1996), “Because qualitative research is necessarily inductive and grounded, any significant prestructuring of the methods leads to a lack of flexibility to respond to emergent insights and creates methodological blinders in making sense of the data” (p. 63). The researcher remained cognizant of this limitation and worked to avoid making preliminary assumptions. This was achieved by utilizing triangulation techniques and a focus group where the assumptions and tentative theory was discussed with the participants. This will be further discussed in the methodology section in chapter three.

Research participants were first-year master’s degree students enrolled in counseling programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) at three Midwestern universities in the Winter and Spring quarters/semesters of 2006. The first interview took place during Winter quarter or at the beginning of the second semester while the second interview occurred
near the end of the year. This longitudinal approach allowed the researcher to converse with the students at two points over time. The researcher had limited contact with the department chairs of the three programs to introduce the research topic. Further, the researcher had never met the students who were interviewed. Given these limitations, issues of openness and honesty could have arisen. However, given the researcher’s background and experiences with first-year counseling students, the researcher was qualified to negotiate relationships with the participants, which promoted the essential reflection needed. Additionally, the researcher is a doctoral student at one of the universities. Due to the researcher’s affiliation with the university program, special precautions (peer debriefing and member checks) were made to decrease the risk of researcher bias. This is more thoroughly discussed in chapter three, however it is important to note that the researcher was aware of these potential limitations prior to conducting the research.

Conclusion

A number of researchers in Counselor Education have identified factors influencing student-counselor development (Etringer et al., 1995; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Morrissette, 1996). Yet there is a lack of information regarding the first-year experience of a counseling master’s program that is grounded in actual students’ reports of their experiences during their first year. This type of information provided counselor educators, as well as the counseling profession, a better understanding of first-year students and the factors influencing their development. Further, knowledge can provide
counselor educators with the information to revise and refine curriculum development to provide more effective training experiences.
Chapter II

Review of the Literature

Researchers in counselor education have identified a number of factors that promote healthy student and counselor development. Although many articles speak directly to cognitive development, a number of articles have begun to look at development from a more broad perspective. Researchers have categorized counselor development and student development in a variety of different ways to include identifying themes and critical incidents in student and counselor development, understanding theories of student learning, understanding counselor reflection, understanding cognitive complexity and cognitive development, and examining different pedagogical tools and strategies used by counselor educators. These concepts are important to address as one fully explores the research on student-counselor development.

Themes and Critical Incidents in Counselor Development

Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) conducted qualitative research with 100 therapists and counselors from the first year of graduate study to 40 years beyond graduate training to identify themes in normative counselor development. Data was gathered from semi-structured interviews consisting of 20 questions with topics ranging from transitions, sources of influence, personal theories of counselor development to miscellaneous topics including questions asking how counselors measures success for themselves as well as their clients. Although this research provided numerous themes within counselor development, the authors noted that much of developmental research deals with growth
during the training years while “little attention has been paid to the many working years beyond graduate school” (p. 506). Even though the authors interviewed an equal number of participants in each group, the primary focus was on counselors beyond the graduate years. It is interesting to note that individuals who participated in the study were mostly psychologists. Even though personal experiences may be similar between psychology graduate students and counseling graduate students, it is important to maintain and strengthen the professional identity of the counseling profession and conduct research that specifically deals with counseling students rather than grouping them together with psychology students.

While there is a better understanding of counselors who are beyond graduate school, there is still not a full understanding of the relevant issues that surface during the first year of graduate school for counseling students. Those relevant issues, or critical incidents as some authors have defined them, are influential in a student’s development as a burgeoning counselor. Furr and Carroll (2003) defined a critical incident as “a positive or negative experience recognized by the student as significant because of its influence on the student’s development as a counselor” (p. 483). Critical incidents have also be defined as, “events that in some way greatly influence who we are and what we do” (Cormier, 1988, p. 131).

Furr and Carroll (2003) asked master’s level students at the practicum and internship levels to reflect on their past experiences and identify events they believed were critical to their development as counselors. Positive events students identified revolved around experiential learning exercises and learning to trust other students in
sharing personal information whereas negative incidents involved activities that forced students to recognize deficits in developing insights. A limitation with this study, however, involves the fact that the students were already into their field experiences (practicum and/or internship). Therefore, the emotional impact of some of the critical incidents may have dissipated over time to not seem as important one year later.

Morrissette (1996) described critical issues that emerged during the training process of both master’s and doctoral level counseling psychology students. Through informal conversations and observations, the author conceptualized a number of issues that were critical for student-counselor development that ultimately impacted the student both personally and professionally. Morrissette submitted that student-counselors were often reluctant to discuss the discomfort associated with their progress due to the fear of colleagues or professors possibly translating those vulnerabilities as personal inadequacies or professional deficiencies. Another issue revolved around becoming emotionally involved with or sexually attracted to their clients, which Morrissette posited could lead to countertransference issues. Examples of emotional over-involvement included rescuing clients from despair, over-accommodating clients as a sign of caring, or actually becoming sexually attracted to the client. The author suggested the emotional issues raised by clients could trigger emotional reactions in student-counselors that could interfere with treatment. Another critical issue for student-counselors included clinically based issues such as competency-based and supervisory-based anxiety. Anxiety was based on feelings of inadequacy in both the clinical and supervisory settings. “For many students, the skills inherent in effective counseling are much more challenging than
initially anticipated” (p. 35). Further, Morrissette also identified student-counselor trauma as a critical issue. He conceptualized trauma as the counselors’ lack of attention to their own welfare which leads to helper impairment and possibly burnout. This trauma could lead to conflict between the student-counselor and his/her clients. Furthermore, if the student believed that the client was not progressing as quickly as the student expected, the student may have become angry at the client. This parallels the theme identified by Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) that beginning level graduate students measure their competency on the level of improvement of their clients.

Morrissette (1996) conducted informal conversations with students rather than developing a rationale for the types of questions he would ask. Furthermore, there was little organization or relationship established among the identified themes. Rather, the author listed issues he believed to be critical. Nonetheless, research dealing with critical incidents is very useful for both students and counselor educators alike because identifying what incidents are critical for students as they develop can assist counselor educators to better understand and best facilitate student learning.

**Student Learning**

A variety of learning theories have been developed to better understand the processes students go through in order to learn and comprehend issues. Perry (1970) identified four stages through which students progress, beginning with absolutist thought and dependency on authorities for answers, to more complex thinking where students are able to engage in relativist thought and have more autonomous thinking. Within the field of counselor education, several learning theories received more emphasis, namely,
constructivism and experiential learning. While a number of learning theories have been applied to counselor education such as contextual learning (Granello, 2000) and social-cognitive learning (Fong, 1998), constructivism and experiential learning theories have gained the most attention.

Constructivist learning theory is based on work by Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky and is based on concept development and deep understanding rather than behaviors and skills (Fosnot, 1996). Nelson and Neufeldt stated “Constructivism is rooted in the notion that our beliefs and assumptions, many of which are theoretical and many of which are grounded in data, are products of the meanings that we make in our social contexts” (1998, p. 79). Therefore, according to constructivist theory, students are continually making meaning of their learning experiences through the social milieus in which they are immersed. Guiffrida (2005) posited that learning is influenced by prior experiences as well as current learning experiences and rather than using language to convey ideas, language should be used to convey discoveries and understanding of the phenomena in question. It is a shift from traditional learning theories based on imparting information to students, to a learner-centered paradigm of learning in which one is in charge of one’s own learning and understanding. Constructivist learning also encourages more critical thinking and critical dialogue to sift through one’s own thoughts and perceptions of different phenomena. In addition to constructivist learning theory, experiential learning theory also is widely used within counselor education.

Kolb (1984) has conducted extensive research on experiential learning and has stated, “The experiential learning theory of development focuses on the transaction
between internal characteristics and external circumstances, between personal knowledge and social knowledge. It is the process of learning from experience that shapes and actualizes developmental potentialities” (p. 133). Therefore, to fully understand students’ experiences, one must understand student learning. By gathering information directly from students regarding their experiences, one can gather a more comprehensive, holistic perspective on student-counselor development. Given that the profession of counseling is based on developmental principles and social processes, experiential learning has been a widely used pedagogical tool to teach a variety of different constructs to students.

Arthur and Achenbach (2002) used experiential learning activities to help students develop multicultural competencies. They posited that experiential learning promoted self-awareness through demonstrating the important influences of thoughts and feelings in the counseling role. Another study examined master’s students’ perceptions of experiential learning and the process the students went through as they encountered experiential exercises. Auxier, Hughes, and Kline (2003) found that over time experiential learning was perceived as very important by second year master’s degree counselor education students whereas first-year master’s degree counselor education students often relied on more conceptual knowledge. This is consistent with many theories of student development that state that beginning students desire concrete information and expect lecture-formatted classes and written exams. The influence of class format on learning is echoed by Kolb (1984) who described a powerful dynamic between self-characteristics and environmental demands. He stated, “Environments tend to change personal characteristics to fit them and people tend to select themselves into
environments that are consistent with their personal characteristics” (p. 143). A person’s state of development is the product of the transaction between personal experience and the particular system of social knowledge in which it interacts (Kolb). Therefore, understanding students’ experiences during the time the experiences take place, and directly reported from the students, can illustrate the factors influencing student learning and development.

In an attempt to understand one factor of student learning, McAuliffe (2002) conducted a qualitative study to ascertain how students believed they had changed and what had influenced their change throughout their educational experience. Students’ responses indicated the following: (a) increased reflexivity, defined as the consideration for multiple perspectives, (b) increased autonomy, defined as, “the capacity to distinguish one’s own from others’ perspectives and to act accordingly, as opposed to unquestioningly adhering to social expectations and norms” (p. 208), and (c) valuing dialogue which included actively attending and engaging in interaction with others. A delimitation of this research was that the research involved undergraduate students in a counseling program. This does not account for the developmental experiences of first-year graduate students. As one examines the factors influencing student learning, research indicates that instilling reflective skills, both personally and professionally, is important for counseling graduate students.

Counselor Reflection

A number of researchers have identified the significance of teaching counselors-in-training the importance of professional reflection. Griffith and Frieden (2000) defined
reflective thinking as “the active, ongoing examination of the theories, beliefs, and assumptions that contribute to counselors' understanding of client issues and guide their choices for clinical interventions” (p. 82). Given the complexity of the counseling profession and the variety of situations that counselors face in clinical practice, the importance of stressing continuous professional reflection is essential in a counselor education program (Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998). According to Perry (1970), entry level students enter into a program with a dualistic mode of thinking whereby they make decisions and view the world in absolute terms. Given that dualistic framework, first-year counseling students may not always understand the necessity for reflection and may prefer to have the information presented in a more direct manner so they can study it and be tested on it. Research has stated that the personal awareness of counselors in addition to professional reflection produces more effective counselors, yet there is little research that directly speaks to the students’ experiences and perspectives as they learn how to be reflective counselors. Therefore, one of the goals of the present study is to encourage a reflective stance among first-year counseling graduate students while they discuss their first-year experiences.

Etringer, Hillerbrand, and Claiborn (1995) stated that the goal of counselor educators is largely to understand and then train counselors to think more like experts, fostering the development of expertise. Counselor educators must go beyond teaching isolated techniques to also include the tools and traits that enable counselors to develop expertise such as professional reflection. Griffith and Frieden provided a number of ways to both facilitate and increase student reflection including Socratic questioning, journal
writing, the use of Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR), and reflection teams within a group context.

Understanding the importance of reflection and learning how to professionally reflect, the ambiguous nature of counseling may prove to be difficult for counseling students. As students begin to notice that learning how to counsel contains a great deal of “grey” areas and many “it depends” answers, the students must begin to wrestle with the inherent ambiguity (Levitt & Jacques, 2005). There are a variety of techniques counselor educators have employed to best facilitate and teach reflection for beginning students, however there may be other factors that influence students’ willingness to reflect.

Manthei (1997) surveyed first-year students using the Counselor Evaluation Rating Scale (CERS) to compare the effects of completing the scale to increasing levels of reflection. The CERS is a self-report measure, originally designed for counseling supervisors to use with students in practicum and internship experiences. In this study, the CERS was utilized to facilitate a self-reflective attitude among students by providing them the results of the inventory. Students completed initial pre-tests at the beginning of the semester, followed by the same scale near the end of the academic year, which was termed a retrospective pre-test, a post-test, and a written component where they were asked specific questions regarding why their scores increased, decreased, or stayed the same. Results revealed that completing the CERS had indeed contributed to the students' self-analysis, knowledge of their own counseling skill, and overall understanding of the training process in which they were currently enrolled. The authors stated, “the written comments from individuals in each group revealed different ways of viewing their initial
levels of skill and the impact of the training experience on them” (Manthei, 1997, p.233) revealing the differences in experiences among counseling students.

Besides the fact that the CERS was 25 years old at the time of the study, several trainees reported a difficult time answering some of the questions. Even though students were offered an opportunity to answer open-ended questions, in addition to the quantitative questionnaire, the authors stated that the “patterns of scores and the reasons for them suggest that the effects of training on individual students may be more varied and complex than can be explained by a single concept” (Manthei, 1997, p. 233). Thus, this qualitative inquiry, in which the researcher’s assumption is not generalization and in which students are afforded the opportunity to discuss and reflect on their entire experience, will produce a more comprehensive examination of the factors influencing professional reflection.

With qualitative research, researchers utilize presupposition questions as opposed to leading questions. Glesne (1999) and Patton (2002) differentiate presupposition questions as questions in which the interviewer presupposes that the participant has a response to the question and has something to say about the given phenomenon. By comparison, leading questions make it obvious to the participant the type of response or desired direction the researcher is attempting to achieve. Researchers who incorporate open-ended questions or “qualitative methods” into a quantitative design are operating from quantitative, positivist assumptions. Therefore, the questions often times resemble leading questions as opposed to presupposition questions in which the participant is allowed to look at the phenomenon in a more holistic manner.
Schon (1987) characterized reflection as a holistic skill in which one must understand the whole in order to understand it at all. He stated that reflection did not involve “learning first to carry out smaller units of activity and then to string those units together in a whole design process; for the pieces tend to interact with one another and to derive their meaning and characters from the whole process in which they are embedded” (p. 158). This statement is a testament to the fact that by having students reflect on their experiences as they experience them, they can derive meanings from their experiences that will lend to a deeper understanding of themselves in the process of their first year in a counseling program.

Consistent with reflection on a person’s development as a counselor, Hoshmand (2004) noted that students’ self-understanding as well as the cognizance of self in the process of learning is also important for reflective practice and overall development. By utilizing critical dialogue and reflection exercises, students have an opportunity to discuss and reflect on their role as a student, counselor-in-training, and as an individual. This enables students to understand the importance of reflection in both their personal and professional lives.

As evidenced by the aforementioned literature, the research supports the need to emphasize the importance of personal and professional reflection for counselors-in-training. Authors have posited a variety of strategies regarding how to best facilitate student reflection, surveyed students regarding levels of reflection, and stressed the importance of deriving meaning from students’ experiences (Griffith & Frieden, 2000; Hoshmand, 2004; Manthei, 1997). As previously mentioned, Schon (1987) has classified
reflection as a holistic skill in which one must understand the whole before attempting to understand its smaller components. While authors have emphasized the importance of reflection, there may be factors occurring during the first year that influence students’ reflective practices such as their levels of cognitive development and cognitive complexity.

Cognitive Development and Cognitive Complexity

Granello (2002) studied the cognitive complexity of graduate students and found that students regressed in their cognitive development when faced with new and unfamiliar tasks. This can be translated into first-year counseling students facing new and unfamiliar tasks associated with being in the first year of a counseling program. A number of researchers have investigated the most effective ways to foster students’ cognitive development and increase cognitive complexity. The basic premise of cognitive development theory states that “reasoning and behavior is strongly associated with the level of complexity of psychological functioning” (Brendel, Kolbert, & Foster, 2002, p. 218). This is consistent with Perry’s model of college student development in which students enter undergraduate programs with absolutist thought and dependence on authorities.

Etringer, Hillerbrand, and Claiborn (1995) conducted comparable research on the transition seen in counseling graduate students as they progress from novice to expert counselors and stated that students entering counseling programs have different memory structures than those who are considered to be experts in the field. Entry level students often possess declarative memory structures that require factual information to be
presented that is loaded with details in order to solve a given problem. Contrary to novice counselors, expert counselors possess more procedural knowledge structures to which information is categorized into relevant categories and can be more abstract in terms of delivery. Expert counselors utilizing procedural knowledge are much more efficient and accurate because they can recognize and articulate patterns in the information and see the big picture, rather than solely focusing on the details.

In addition to examining the differences in knowledge and memory structures, Granello (2001) conceptualized Bloom’s taxonomy as a method for promoting cognitive complexity through graduate students’ written work. Blooms’ taxonomy involves a hierarchy of six cognitive operations: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bloom et al., 1956). Knowledge entails being able to recognize and recall information. Comprehension builds upon knowledge through which information can be understood and summarized. Application involves the ability to use the newly learned information in novel situations and apply the concepts. Analysis includes the ability to break down information into components and identify themes in the information. Synthesis builds upon analysis in that it involves putting the information back together to form a new whole. Finally, evaluation involves the ability to judge the material. Evaluation is the highest cognitive order because it requires all of the skill levels to be used simultaneously.

Granello (2001) suggested that using a specific cognitive strategy such as Bloom’s taxonomy lends itself to students demonstrating higher levels of cognitive complexity. Increasing the level of graduate students’ writing abilities has the capacity
for increased development of critical thinking and has also been linked to enhanced learner-directed learning. In addition to understanding and conceptualizing cognitive complexity in terms of taxonomy, Fong, Borders, Ethington, and Pitts (1997) researched counseling students’ cognitive development over the course of their training program.

Fong et al. (1997) investigated overall cognitive functioning of counseling students over the course of an entire entry level training program to determine if and when cognitive changes occurred during the training program. The researchers also assessed the relationship of cognitive development to actual counseling behavior. Results showed that after completing an initial counseling skills course, counseling students showed “significant changes in their level of thoughts about the client, becoming more narrowly focused on psychological characteristics of the client” (p. 110) as well as changes in counseling performance. Although this provides fruitful information for the effects of initial counseling skills courses, it is not connected to the students’ actual experiences in the skills course. Normally, the skills course is one of the very first classes that students experience. Therefore, to limit the measurement of students’ cognitive development solely to skills learned in the initial class leaves out a variety of other factors that may be affecting their overall cognitive development.

In addition to understanding the development of cognitive skills over the course of a training program, other researchers have tried to conceptualize the broader development of counseling students. Granello (2002) investigated cognitive development of counseling students at three different times during their training. Granello conceptualized cognitive development by using Perry’s (1970) model. The author
suggested that as students enter programs, they are in the dualistic stage in which information is seen in a very dichotomous way. Using a variety of pedagogical techniques, counselor educators need to attempt to push students to more multiplistic thinking. Granello suggested providing students a general cognitive model which would illustrate developmentally appropriate experiences and provide an expected map of cognitive progress. However, research has stated that there is much variation among students and developmental models in general may be too prescribed to the actual realities of the students (Fong, 1998). By generalizing all students to a prescribed developmental model of cognitive development, counselor educators are limiting their views of other possibilities that may be influencing cognitive development and overall student-counselor development. Nevertheless, research on cognitive development has also spanned to other areas such as the ability to express empathy.

Much of the developmental research has stated that students operating from higher levels of cognitive development have an increased capacity to experience empathy with others (Kohlberg, 1984; Lovell, 1999; Lyons & Hazler, 2002; Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989). Lovell (1999) found that empathy and cognitive development were positively related; however, they only found moderate effect size (.20-.40). Another limitation stated by the authors,

Despite the value that the present investigation might have as basic research, and though it may be somewhat helpful in making predictions about counselor performance, the differences in empathy accounted for are quantitative ones. This points to a major
limitation of the study; it lacks the nuance that more qualitative
descriptions would carry….To know what counselors at various
developmental stages actually say about empathy, and to observe
what they are doing when they say they are using empathy, would
be desirable directions for future research (p. 200).

This statement is testimony to the need to examine students’ experiences
at varying developmental stages starting with the first year in the
counseling program.

In more recent research, Lyons and Hazler (2002) investigated the relationship
between the year in a counseling program, cognitive development, and empathy
development for counseling students. Lyons and Hazler utilized the Questionnaire
Measure of Emotional Empathy (QMEE; Mehrabian & Epstein, 1971) and the
Empathetic Understanding Scales (EUS; Carkhuff, 1969) to measure the relationship
between cognitive development level and affective and cognitive skill-based empathy.
Results concluded that empathy did seem to be learned or developed in counselor
education classrooms and that second-year students demonstrated greater affective/trait-
based empathy possibly due to the training. This may be influenced by the fact that
second-year students typically are engaged in either a practicum or internship field-based
experience. Further, Lyons and Hazler stressed the importance of counselor educators
teaching beyond techniques to increase students’ levels of critical thinking. By doing this,
students are developing increased cognitive complexity.
Other researchers have attempted to match the developmental level of the students with the type of instructional delivery. Brendel, Kolbert, and Foster (2002) conducted a longitudinal study using 32 graduate counseling students to examine the developmental changes that occurred as they engaged in a “theoretically grounded counselor preparation curriculum designed to enhance the moral reasoning and cognitive complexity of students as well as teach them the basic skills and theories of counselor education” (p. 218). They concluded that “matching the educational components of cognitive developmental theory may be effective in promoting the cognitive complexity of students” (p. 222). During the first year of study, students primarily received academic instruction through a didactic format with a high degree of structure and concrete examples. As the students progressed through the program, role-taking experiences were incorporated to promote the intellectual and affective levels of the students (Brendel et al., 2002). However, the researchers found that most of the students’ cognitive complexity did not increase until they were placed out in the field. The review of this counselor preparation curriculum, associated with the moral development of counselors, is helpful for supporting the fact that cognitive complexity can be increased through practicum and internship experiences (Brendel et al., 2002). Improving cognitive complexity and cognitive development among counseling graduate students is important for counselor educators and has influenced counselor education pedagogy (Granello, 2001).

Counselor Education Pedagogy

There has been little research in Counselor Education reviewing the pedagogical practices for the most effective presentation of counseling materials to students. Sexton
(1998) stated that the literature is lacking in describing the art and science of teaching counseling and that CACREP sets forth what information needs to be taught within Counselor Education but does not provide information on the most effective method to present the material. Sexton introduced a special issue of *Counselor Education and Supervision* focusing solely on pedagogical practices within Counselor Education. Nelson and Neufeldt (1998) reviewed the counseling pedagogy research and found that most research focused on teaching specific concepts such as client conceptualization, theoretical acquisition, and specific counseling problems. The authors’ argument was that as technical adherence increases and as students focus on specific techniques, the quality of the relationship between the counselor and the client as well as their development as counselors decreases. They recommended counselor educators become more constructivist in their teaching methods. Nelson and Neufeldt suggested that constructivist educators “assist students to obtain as much information as possible so that students can struggle with what is there” (p. 80). They also recommended that “constructivist educators invite students to question time-honored ideas and provide them with problems that they must solve collectively” (p. 80). These recommendations are based on constructivist thought that involves being an active participant in developing and testing knowledge (Nelson & Neufeldt).

Fong (1998) critiqued Nelson and Neufeldt (1998) saying that while the constructivist information was thorough, it lacked the necessary analysis and discussion to fully develop the assumptions presented. Students’ descriptions of their experiences
would provide a comprehensive examination of their experience that could be used to better understand the effects of constructivist pedagogical techniques.

In addition to constructivist theory, Granello (2000) posited another related pedagogical tool for counselor educators, namely contextual teaching. Contextual teachers believe that the most effective way to transfer learning is to actively participate in a new situation (Granello, 2000). Contextual teaching can be achieved through problem-based learning which applies new knowledge to real life problems. It is aligned with both constructivism and social cognitive models and includes such concepts as (a) the social nature of cognition using discussion and sharing ideas to negotiate understanding, (b) the distributed nature of cognition assuming that individuals need to work together to comprehend all of the information necessary to complete most tasks, (c) problem-based learning applying real world problems to the concepts being learned, and (d) authentic assessment utilizing comprehensive assessment such as portfolios and treatment plans rather than solely traditional assessment tools. The variety of concepts associated with contextual teaching parallels the number of ways issues in counseling can be viewed and conceptualized.

This idea of associating a number of possibilities to a given concept is consistent with Levitt and Jacques (2005) who specifically wrote about the ambiguity inherent in counselor education. They suggested that counselor educators need to embrace ambiguity within the classroom and model a variety of paths a student might take in order to learn a given concept. They also noted that students may want to revert back to “seeking hard and fast answers” (p. 48). Developmentally, this seems to be more prevalent within the
first year given the fact that students are coming from more traditional teacher-centered classrooms (Huba & Freed, 2000). McAuliffe (2002) offered students’ reports concluding “the abstraction-dominated, deductively oriented lecture-with-some-discussion dominates the counseling classroom discourse” (p. 205). Given these researchers’ comments, it seems only necessary to consult with students to determine the accuracy of these accounts. Furthermore, it is important to expand our understanding of counselor education pedagogy from individual classes to the entire sequence of classes in a counselor education curriculum.

Researchers in counselor education have specifically examined the order in which classes are sequenced to ascertain the developmental aspects of counselor education curriculum. Although the CACREP standards inform programs regarding the core areas counselors-in-training need to complete, little research has been conducted on the actual sequence of the classes to maximize student learning. In response, Granello and Hazler (1998) conducted research on different developmental models as well as different teaching styles in order to provide a rationale for the sequence of classes in counselor education. They provided a comprehensive view of developmental models namely in counselor education, adult development, college student development, and novice to expert development. They also provided information regarding different teaching styles and instructional methods that may be used to facilitate movement toward the subsequent developmental stage. They concluded that counselor education programs should adapt their curriculum and teaching styles to meet the developmental level of the students. Further, they stated the primary limitation was that, “little of this research has been
conducted on graduate students in counselor education” (p. 103). More important, there is a lack of information regarding students’ developmental levels in counselor education. To the author’s knowledge, no studies have specifically addressed this issue with first-year counseling graduate students.

A recent article examined the first semester experiences of first-year doctoral students in counselor education (Hughes & Kleist, 2005). The authors conducted three rounds of interviews at the third, ninth, and fifteenth week of the first semester to gather information from incoming doctoral students. Using qualitative analysis, specifically grounded theory, the authors illuminated the students’ experiences and various feelings associated with beginning doctoral study such as changes in emotions, thoughts, self-doubt, and uncertainty. As the theory developed, the authors noted that the students indeed progressed through three stages including “vicissitudes, integration, and confirmation” (p. 103). While these processes were not necessarily linear, one can see development in these students over the course of their first semester. This type of qualitative research provides credence for the importance of studying students within their first year and illustrates that there are a variety of different processes that occur as students begin a new course of study, in this case doctoral work.

In an effort to fill in the gaps of previous research and facilitate a deeper understanding of the experiences of first-year masters’ counseling students, this study proposes to engage first-year counseling students to allow them to provide insights into their experiences during their first year. A qualitative study is being proposed as the best way to come to an understanding of the experiences of nine first-year counseling
students’ in an attempt to answer the question, “What are the experiences of being a first-year counseling graduate student?” By conducting qualitative research, specifically by developing a grounded theory, the researcher proposes a tentative theory that is grounded in the data provided by the students. The goal is to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of first-year counseling students during that first year.

This research has a number of implications. Qualitative research can offer insights into the developmental perspective of sequencing courses such as Counseling Techniques, Counseling Theories, Group Counseling, and Multicultural Counseling. Further, it can facilitate counselor educators’ understanding of their students’ development with the hopes of implementing appropriate pedagogical techniques for first-year counseling students. Utilizing a qualitative approach can also assist students in reflecting on their own experiences and discussing those reflections with others.

**Conclusion**

Despite literature on cognitive development, student development, and counselor development, there is a lack of research that describes the experiences of first-year counseling graduate students. Thus far, the counselor education research that addresses counselors’-in-training experiences focuses primarily on specific aspects of training, but does not provide a comprehensive examination of the plethora of possibilities that first-year students may be experiencing. This lack of research points to the need for more research. The literature has supported further investigation of students’ development of empathy (Lovell, 1999) as well as investigating students who are actually in counselor education programs (Granello & Hazler, 1998).
Researchers have stressed the importance of instilling continuous professional reflection (Griffith & Frieden) and personal reflection (Hoshmand, 2004) to student-counselors. Nelson and Neufeldt (1998) specifically state, “Qualitative methodologies that tap student experiences of struggling with knowledge and reflecting on their practices can provide important information about how our creative models are working and how to improve them” (p. 84). Specific to counseling pedagogy, it is important to continue to ensure that counselor trainees receive the best possible training (Guiffrida, 2005). To address the limitations of prior literature and research, this study utilizes methodology designed to explore and describe the experiences of first-year counseling graduate students during their first year in a counselor education program. The methodology most suited for the purpose of this research is naturalistic inquiry. More specifically, this study employs a qualitative methodology, grounded theory, to explore the experiences of first-year counseling graduate students within the context of their first year in a counseling program.
Chapter III

Methodology

To address the limitations of prior literature and research, I conducted a qualitative analysis, specifically grounded theory, to ascertain first-year counseling students’ experiences directly from the students themselves. This chapter provides a complete description of the conceptual context, which was the theoretical basis that informed the data collection procedures. This was followed by the specific data collection methods that included developing specific interview questions, making initial sampling decisions, discussing the research site, and selecting methods to collect and analyze data (Maxwell, 1996; Patton, 2002). This chapter also includes information regarding naturalistic inquiry and grounded theory in order to provide a clear picture of the methodology proposed. Finally, in any qualitative research, it is important to recognize the role of the researcher and the importance of establishing the trustworthiness of the data.

Conceptual Context

The conceptual context is the theoretical framework on which this qualitative study is based (Maxwell, 1996). For the purpose of this research, experiential knowledge, prior research, and existing literature was used to construct the conceptual context. The conceptual context of this investigation of first-year counseling students’ experiences during their first year is based, in part, on the researcher’s personal and professional experience with first-year counseling students. These experiences have resulted in three assumptions including, (a) first-year counseling students have a period of change in
which they realize that the program is different from what they had expected, (b) the first year in a counseling program is influential in their development as a counselor, and (c) students are affected by the use of different pedagogical techniques that may be new to them. These assumptions have resulted in a desire to further understand the first-year experience of counseling graduate students. By attaining this deeper understanding, counselor educators can revise and refine their pedagogical techniques to best suit the students’ developmental needs as well as assist their development as counselors.

Existing theory and research were also used as sources of information to construct the conceptual context which was primarily evidenced in chapter two. A review of the relevant literature suggested that counseling students experience changes that influence their overall development, both personally and professionally. However, there is very limited research that delves solely into first-year counseling students’ experiences. This lack of information indicates that exploratory research was needed. Research indicates that while there is information available regarding different developmental models, there has been very little research conducted using actual counseling students. Moreover, most of the relevant literature is based on anecdotal evidence based on either professors’ accounts of student development or participants, including counseling and counseling psychology students lumped together. Therefore, given the context of the literature, a researchable problem existed within the context of the research (Strauss & Corbin, 1997).

The conceptual context served as a foundation and helped the researcher assess the purpose, develop and select realistic and relevant research questions and methods, and identify potential validity threats to the conclusions (Maxwell, 1996). The conceptual
context can consist of using information gathered from four possible sources: (a) experiential knowledge, (b) prior theory and research, (c) pilot and exploratory studies, and (d) thought experiments. Maxwell also contends that using existing literature can illuminate holes in the literature; however he also warns that “it can deform the way you frame your research causing you to overlook important ways of conceptualizing your study of key implications of your results” (p. 34). In order to counter this challenge, the researcher maintained a balance of objectivity and sensitivity which was an inherent responsibility of any qualitative researcher. The importance of maintaining a balance of objectivity and sensitivity with the data is more fully discussed later in this chapter.

In grounded theory research, the subsequent step is developing a grand research question. Strauss and Corbin (1998) stated that the research question should “provide the flexibility and freedom to explore the phenomenon in depth” (p. 40) and should include aspects of both action and process. Therefore, as mentioned earlier, the purpose of this research was to explore and describe the first-year experiences of counseling graduate students. Thus the grand research question was: “What are the experiences of being a first-year counseling graduate student?” This grand research question allows the students the freedom to describe specific incidents as well as the overall process of being a first-year counseling graduate student.

Data Collection Procedures

In addition to shaping the grand research question, the conceptual context informed decisions about how data collection should take place. Decisions about data collection include choosing specific interview questions, making initial sampling
decisions, and selecting methods to collect data (Maxwell, 1996; Patton, 2002). The proposed interview questions were generated by operationalizing the grand research question. During this process it was important to consider the following: (a) Are the questions understandable and answerable by the participants? (b) Can the participants provide data that will be useful in answering the grand research question? (c) Do the questions avoid dictating specific responses? (Maxwell, 1996).

To develop specific interview questions for this study, the researcher reviewed the previously outlined conceptual context. Questions generated were pilot tested with several counseling master’s students to ensure that they were understandable and answerable. The interview questions were:

1. “Describe your thoughts, feelings, and perceptions as a first-year counseling graduate student.”
2. “What is it like being a first-year student in the counseling program?”
3. “What were your assumptions regarding being in a counseling program before you began?”
4. “What has been the most influential event or incident so far in your first year as a counseling student?”

These initial questions were designed to be sensitive to the conceptual context of the study while also allowing the expression of the unique experiences of the participants.

Consistent with grounded theory methodology, the grand research question and interview questions were designed to be flexible, sensitive, and open to the breadth of experiences of first-year counseling students. The initial questions were very broad and
were continually refined based on the participants’ responses. The interviews were approximately one hour in length. The first interview took place early to mid-winter quarter, or near the beginning of the second semester. It is important to note that during the initial interviews, the researcher requested elaboration when needed. In subsequent interviews, which were conducted early to mid-spring, or the middle of a semester, the researcher contacted respondents with additional clarifying questions. This process was repeated until redundancy and saturation was achieved. Subsequent questions were based on the analysis of data obtained during the initial interview. These questions were more focused than the initial questions. All interviews were designed to be non-intrusive and avoid harm to or psychological distress in the participants. Consistent with grounded theory procedures, the next step was to determine the selection process for the participants. The participant selection and research site are fully described.

Participants and research site. In order to gain a better, deeper understanding of the first-year experience in a counseling graduate program, the researcher proposed to study three first-year counseling students from three different universities for a total of nine participants. The participants were first-year students at Ohio University, University of Toledo, and Youngstown State University. These programs were chosen because all are accredited by the Council of Accreditation for Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) which ensured that all of the participants experience similar class structures as outlined by the CACREP standards.

The programs within each university shared similarities and differences in terms of their composition as well as their faculty. Each university housed both community and
school counseling programs. One university also housed a rehabilitation counseling program, another housed a school psychology program, and the other housed a student affairs leadership program. Each of the programs also admits a similar number of students, typically 30-40 students each year. Moreover, the faculty at each institution were held many similarities in terms of experience and background. For example, each program had both tenured and non-tenured professors, approximately even numbers of male and female professors, and varying years of professional experience. Therefore, while the program make-ups were similar, they were not identical.

Consistent with grounded theory methodology, it was important to purposefully select participants who could provide the information needed to answer the research questions (Maxwell, 1996; Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1997; 1998). The sampling for this study reflected the setting and participants that were best suited to investigate and develop a theory grounded in the experiences of first-year counseling students in their first year of the counseling program. According to Maxwell, purposeful sampling is a “strategy in which particular settings, persons, or events are selected deliberately in order to provide important information that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (1996, p. 70). Further, Strauss and Corbin (1997) describe purposeful sampling as a technique in which the sites, events, and participants being studied are deliberately chosen. Patton (2002) states, “Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry. Studying information-rich cases yielded insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical
generalizations” (p. 230). Each participant was involved in a personally engaging class, such as a counseling skills class, group counseling, or multicultural counseling.

In order to gain entry, I contacted the chair of the Counselor Education department at each University and scheduled a meeting to propose my research to him or her. I requested recommendations of students who they believed would be willing to reflect and discuss their experience. I also requested that the students range in age, sex, and race, as realistic as possible given the sample size, to strive for maximum variation with the data.

For this research, the purposeful sampling strategy employed was maximum variation. According to Patton (2002), this strategy aimed to “capture and describe the central themes that cut across a great deal of variation” (p. 235). Maximum variation identified common patterns that emerged from great variation that were of particular interest in gathering the core experiences of the participants within their context (Patton, 2002). Therefore, two important types of findings were yielded by using this strategy. This technique captured the uniqueness of each site, including a high-quality detailed description of each case, while also identifying common themes across the sites and deriving their significance emerging out of a heterogeneity sample (Patton, 2002).

In terms of reciprocity, I explained the benefits of my research and offered them a copy of my results upon the completion of data analysis. Glesne (1999) suggested that researchers should be ready to nurture the relationship with those willing and able to serve in a collaborator role. “In this, as in your other research relationships, you must be attuned to the responsibilities of reciprocity, and to the need not to offend or exploit as
you develop what ideally is a mutually rewarding association” (p. 56). Furthermore, I used some of the individuals with whom I have met at national and state conferences as well as the individuals with whom I consulted when I was the editorial assistant for *Counselor Education and Supervision* as contact people at the different universities.

Once I gained entry into the research sites, I contacted the participants that the chairpersons recommended. My role in the setting was important to consider because this could affect the participants’ willingness to thoughtfully reflect on their experience (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). I described my intentions, what I was interested in learning, the possible uses of the information, and how the participants could engage in the research. This in turn assisted me in gaining the trust of the participants and allowed for reciprocity in my interviewing them.

In determining sample size, it was important to note that the researcher was concerned with gaining a rich, descriptive understanding of the selected students’ experiences. Patton stated, “There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry” (2002, p. 24). In other words, there is no specific guidance in the qualitative literature that specifies the minimum number of participants needed for any given study. To ensure that the conclusions adequately represent the entire range of variation, rather than only the typical member of the group, maximum variation was solicited (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In order to strive towards maximum variation, the researcher requested that the participants range in age, sex, and race as much as possible. Due to the objectives of maximum variation, the researcher’s small sample of three individuals from three geographically different locations yielded both the high-quality description for each case,
as well as the important shared patterns that cross through all of the cases (Patton, 2002). It is also important to note that if the participants continually had disparate opinions regarding their experiences, additional participants would have been included.

To account for representativeness in my sample, I conducted individual in-depth semi-structure interviews. Prior to conducting the interviews, I spoke with the professors to gain information regarding the students’ willingness to reflect and discuss their experiences in a clear and understandable manner. By doing that, I was deliberately selecting to interview students who could reflect and speak to their experiences. Moreover, Maxwell (1996) described the importance of controlled comparisons “to illuminate the reasons for differences between settings or individuals” (p. 72). I selected individuals from three different counseling programs at two different time frames, early to mid-winter and early to mid-spring. This enabled the participants to give descriptions of their first year as they experienced it. Finally, I conducted a focus group near the end of the academic year to conduct member checks that enabled the participants to ensure that the themes drawn from the interviews were accurate portrayals of their experiences. The focus group consisted of the three participants, as well as other non-participants. These non-participants lent to the credibility of the tentative theory. During the focus group, I presented my tentative theory to the students to check for thoroughness and accuracy. Also, by having more than the three participants in the focus group, it enabled an increased likelihood that the participants would range in diversity.

Data collection methods. Qualitative research methods were selected for this study because a tentative theory grounded in data generated was rich in detail and
embedded in the context (Maxwell, 1996). I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with the nine participants. Participants were solicited by their respective chairpersons based upon their willingness to reflect and discuss their experience in an in-depth interview. In-depth interviews were an appropriate type of data collection because they allowed the participants to describe their experiences in their own words and their own details. Those accounts were then taken and formulated into a working theory. Further, the interviews took place in the natural setting of the university in which the counseling program resided. The interviews were audio taped so that verbatim transcription was possible for the analysis. Upon the completion of the initial interviews, subsequent interviews containing more refined questions took place until redundancy and saturation was achieved.

Finally, a focus group enabled the students an opportunity to check the tentative theory for thoroughness and accuracy. The focus group took place in the natural setting of the university that housed the counselor education program. The focus group included non-participants as well as the three participants and lasted one to two hours. It was also audio-taped so that verbatim transcription could occur for analysis. In addition, there was an observer present in the focus group who took notes. This enabled the researcher the ability to concentrate on the content of the group and to check for accuracy of the proposed tentative theory.

*Method of analysis.* Analysis of the data was ongoing through the data collection phases. According to Maxwell, “the initial step in qualitative analysis is reading the interview transcripts, observational notes, or documents that are to be analyzed” (1996, p.
Data analysis in grounded theory is a process of abstracting and reducing data from the interviews into themes, which are used to build a theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This required the researcher to examine the students’ responses to develop categories, make comparisons, vary possibilities, and consider alternative explanations (Creswell, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Throughout the data analysis process, which was conducted by hand, the researcher strived to maintain a balance between objectivity and sensitivity (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Consistent with grounded theory data analysis procedures, the data from the first round of interviews was initially open coded. Open coding allowed for identification and categorization of concepts that emerge from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this study, the researcher took the students’ responses and analyzed them for initial concepts that were put into categories. The process moved the concepts from very general to more specific as the analysis progressed. Following the open coding process, axial coding was conducted to reassemble data that were broken down during open coding. The purpose of axial coding was to further develop the initial categories that were developed during the open coding process and further relate those categories at the level of their properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, after the open and axial coding was completed, selective coding was employed. Selective coding was the process of integrating and refining the theory from the categories and relationships proposed in the prior steps (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During the selective coding, the researcher worked to integrate the students’ responses, in terms of the categories, properties, and dimensions derived in the previous steps, to further refine the emerging, yet tentative, theory.
Following the coding process, the researcher integrated the information into a tentative theory through the use of a conditional matrix. A conditional matrix integrated the categories, properties, and dimensions of the data. This entailed a diagram that illustrated how the themes were incorporated into a tentative theory.

**Naturalistic Inquiry**

The literature regarding first-year counseling students’ experiences is lacking useful descriptions of the process. Consistent with naturalistic inquiry, this research was conducted at three universities that house counselor education programs. The researcher contacted the participants, scheduled a time for an interview, and then traveled to the university the participants attended to conduct the interview. By conducting the interview in the same setting of the counselor education program takes place and the same setting that the student experiences, the researcher had a greater chance to better understand the students’ experiences because the setting is an integral component of the entire experience. According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), any researcher exploring an individual’s lived experience cannot fully understand the experience without understanding the meaning that is associated with, and attributed to, the experience in question. Therefore, in order to fully grasp the experiences of the students, Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that the research has to take place in the natural setting of the phenomenon. “Naturalistic ontology suggests that realities are wholes that cannot be understood in isolation from their contexts, nor can they be fragmented for separate study of the parts” (p. 39). Because context was essential to meaning, the researcher carried out naturalistic inquiry in the natural setting or context of the phenomenon under
investigation. In addition to conducting context-bound research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) also suggest that naturalistic inquiry uses qualitative methodology.

Given the nature of the setting and context of the counseling program, in addition to wanting to explore and describe the first-year experiences of first-year counseling students, qualitative research, specifically utilizing grounded theory methods, was the ideal methodological framework for this inquiry because it allowed the researcher to get a comprehensive picture of the students’ experiences. Further, qualitative research afforded the opportunity to provide counselor educators an understanding of first-year students’ experiences which was lacking in the current counseling literature. Strauss and Corbin (1998) described qualitative research as any type of research that produced new understanding without relying on statistical procedures or other means of quantification. Specifically, Strauss and Corbin stated, “Qualitative methods can be used to obtain the intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about through more conventional research methods” (1998, p. 11). Furthermore, Maxwell stated that qualitative research is especially useful for gaining understanding of the context in which participants’ actions occur.

Naturalistic inquiry is generally undertaken by using qualitative methods. Given the multiple realities that may exist among first-year counseling students, an inquiry that was conducted in the natural setting of the students’ counselor education program was best suited to ascertain a comprehensive view of counseling students’ experiences. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that qualitative methods are more adaptable to the multiple realities that may exist with a given phenomenon and are more adaptable to the
many mutually shaping influences that may be encountered. Further, grounded theory enabled the development of a tentative theory that was inductively derived from the phenomenon of the first year in a counseling program.

*Grounded Theory*

The grounded theory methodology of qualitative research was most appropriate for this inquiry because the current literature was lacking in its exploration of the actual experiences of first-year counseling graduate students. Qualitative research enabled the exploration and description of the context and setting, and searched for a deeper understanding of the participants’ lived experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). As a result, this exploration allowed for a deeper understanding of first-year graduate students’ lived experience as they experienced their first year in a counseling program.

Consistent with the inductive manner of grounded theory, the researcher began analysis early on in the data collection process by carefully identifying concepts, themes, and relationships in the data (Charmaz, 2003). In other words, analysis began after the first round of interviews and served to guide future interview questions and the overall conceptualization of the data. As the research progressed through repeated interviews and the focus group, themes in the data were continually synthesized and analyzed to organize subsequent data collection and generate a tentative theory of the first-year experience of first-year counseling students. Charmaz stated that grounded theory methods consist of systematic inductive guidelines for gathering, synthesizing, analyzing, and conceptualizing qualitative data to construct theory. Further, Strauss and Corbin
(1998) stated, “Grounded theories, because they are drawn from data, are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action” (p. 12).

Naturalistic inquiry, qualitative research, and specifically grounded theory were essential goals of this research. Qualitative research was the most suitable for this project because the goal is exploration and description of the first-year experience that is grounded in first-year students’ actual reports. Grounded theory procedures served as a foundation for developing a tentative theory, grounded in the participants’ data, regarding their experiences as first-year students within their first year.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher was an integral component in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Maxwell, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1997; 1998). For qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument for data collection and analysis. I am a third year doctoral candidate in Counselor Education at Ohio University. I have my Master’s degree in Rehabilitation Counseling and my certification as a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC). I have taught or co-taught a number of introductory courses, much like the courses from which I will sample my participants such as Introduction to Community Counseling, Group Process, and Introduction to Group Counseling. Further, I have supervised first-year counseling students in a number of different settings namely Counseling Techniques, Counseling Theories, and Group Counseling. Within each of these experiences, I have been awed by watching the first-year students develop as counselors. It is important to reiterate that the researcher neither knew nor had any contact with any of the possible participants prior to the interviews.
As a researcher, it is important to be cognizant of the responsibilities inherent in conducting qualitative research, namely negotiating research relationships, balancing objectivity and sensitivity, and maintaining ethical standards (Creswell, 1994; Maxwell, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Given that the researcher is an inherent component of qualitative research, it is of paramount importance that these responsibilities were fully addressed.

One responsibility of the researcher is negotiating research relationships with the participants (Maxwell, 1996). The researcher contacted the respective departmental chairs of the three universities, described the importance of conducting this research, and provided a preliminary explanation of the data collection procedures. This was done to negotiate a relationship with each site and to gain entry and cooperation for collecting data. Furthermore, given the researcher’s background and experiences with first-year counseling students, the researcher is qualified to negotiate relationships with the participants, which promoted the essential reflection needed. Patton (2002) states, “Entry into the field for evaluation research involves two separate parts: (1) negotiation with gatekeepers, whoever they may be, about the nature of the fieldwork to be done, and (2) actual physical entry into the field setting to begin collecting data” (p. 310). The degree of difficulty may vary given that the quality of the study relies on participants candidly sharing their honest perceptions and reactions to their first year in their counseling program.

Another responsibility of the researcher is the maintenance of objectivity and sensitivity. Strauss and Corbin (1998) describe ways to establish both objectivity and
sensitivity within the data. Objectivity does not mean controlling the variables, but rather it means remaining open and willing to listen to the participants’ “voices.” Strauss and Corbin suggested five techniques to establish objectivity including thinking comparatively, gaining distance to obtain multiple viewpoints of the event or phenomenon, stepping back and assessing what is really going on, maintaining an attitude of skepticism, and following the research procedures. In order to think comparatively, the researcher compared each interview with the others which allowed the researcher to stay grounded in the data. While doing this, the researcher was not using the interview comparisons as data per se, but rather as a way of distinguishing properties to gain some perspective when examining the data. The researcher also worked to obtain multiple viewpoints of the phenomenon by interviewing individuals from three different universities who range in age, sex, race, and experience. The researcher also worked to step back and assess what was really going on by allowing the data to be seen and heard via the students’ voices rather than through the researcher’s voice and by continually checking with the participants to ensure that the derived interpretations were accurate. Maintaining an attitude of skepticism resulted in the categories, hypotheses, and questions being viewed as provisional and “validated against data in subsequent interviews” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 46). Finally, the researcher followed the research procedures including “the procedures of making comparisons, asking questions, and sampling based on evolving theoretical concepts” (p. 46). The researcher actively utilized these techniques for the purpose of developing objectivity.
Within qualitative research, it is essential to also establish sensitivity. Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggested three techniques: (a) the use of literature; (b) the use of professional experience; and (c) the use of personal experience. In this study, the literature assisted in the development of the conceptual context and the grand research question. The use of literature as an analytic tool can be used to provide a “rich source of events to stimulate thinking about properties and for asking conceptual questions” (p. 47). Another way to establish sensitivity is utilizing professional experience. Strauss and Corbin (1998) stressed two elements to remember when using this source of sensitivity. The first is to always compare what one thinks one sees to what one sees at the property or dimensional level because this enables the analyst to use experiences without putting the experience itself into the data. The second is that it is not the researcher’s perception or perspective that matters but rather how research participants see events or happenings. (p. 47)

A final way to establish sensitivity is through the use of personal experience. Personal experiences, such as the researcher’s experiences with first-year counseling students, provided the researcher with a base of information that served as a comparison to the participants’ experiences and the meanings associated with those experiences (Maxwell, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this study, the researcher utilized these sources to maintain sensitivity.

Balancing objectivity and sensitivity was essential in developing the conceptual context of a qualitative study (Maxwell, 1996). The balance between objectivity and sensitivity allowed the researcher to remain sensitive to the subtlety and possible
implicitness of the participants’ responses while describing an impartial and accurate interpretation of the experiences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Therefore, achieving this balance was essential for conducting good qualitative research. When this balance is realized and accomplished, the data reported will ideally represent the true context of the phenomenon.

Another responsibility of the researcher is to maintain ethical standards before, and while, conducting the research (Creswell, 1994). The protection of confidentiality and rights of participants is of paramount importance. The proposed investigation was submitted and received approval by Ohio University’s Institutional Review Board prior to information collection (Appendix A). In addition, participants received an Informed Consent Form that explained the goals and protocol for participating in the research (Appendix B). The participants verified their understanding of the information in the form and then signed it prior to any data collection.

The role of the researcher is essential to qualitative research and grounded theory methodology. The researcher is the instrument of data collection and analysis. Accordingly, the researcher is responsible for establishing research relationships with participants that enable the collection of useful data. The researcher was aware of the necessary balance between objectivity and sensitivity of the information collected. Finally, the researcher was also cognizant of the inherent responsibilities for the protection of the rights of participants and maintaining the ethical standards of this research.
Establishing Trustworthiness

Establishing trustworthiness is of paramount importance for quality qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe the criteria for trustworthiness as including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confimability. Lincoln and Guba relate trustworthiness to how effective a researcher is in persuading his or her audience that the finding of an inquiry are worth paying attention to and worth taking account of.

Credibility. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe credibility as a two-fold process. “First, to carry out the inquiry in such a way that the probability that the findings will be found to be credible is enhanced and, second, to demonstrate the credibility of the findings by having them approved by the constructors of the multiple realities being studied” (p. 296). Threats to a qualitative study include reactivity of the participants to the researcher and researcher bias (Maxwell, 1996). Therefore, to establish credibility, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest the following techniques: prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checks. Further, Creswell (1998) stressed the importance of bracketing researcher bias to avoid a priori assumptions which may jade the data analysis.

Prolonged engagement is one way to establish credibility in qualitative research. The researcher used prolonged engagement by conducting two rounds of interviews as well as conducting a focus group with the same participants. Involvement with the students’ consisted of at least three hours of direct interaction over multiple occasions throughout the students’ first year in the counseling program. Prolonged engagement is described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as “investing sufficient time to achieve certain
purposes… to be involved with a site sufficiently long to detect and take account of distortions that might otherwise creep into the data” (p. 301-302). Prolonged engagement built trust with the participants, provided opportunities to check for misinformation, and enabled the researcher to learn about the given culture (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Triangulation was also used in this study to enhance the credibility. I implemented follow-up interviews and a focus group to allow participants to support or challenge the categories and developing theory. The researcher was open to allowing other first-year students to participate in the focus group to ensure that the tentative theory was consistent with the first-year experience. These multiple sources allowed for greater credibility in the findings. Further, I interviewed participants from a variety of institutions located in Ohio. By interviewing students in different programs, as well as different geographic locations, it made the data much more believable. By conducting follow-up interviews and a focus group, the researcher was afforded the opportunity to member check which increased the likelihood of credible findings for this study.

The researcher also consulted with two other faculty members in order to compare and check the data collection and interpretation. The researcher consulted with these faculty members at every stage of the research in an effort to infuse greater objectivity and reduce researcher bias. Denzin (1970) describes triangulation as collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings while also using a variety of methods in order to reduce the risk that conclusions will reflect only the biases or assumptions made by the researcher.
Peer debriefing is another strategy for establishing and maintaining credibility in qualitative research. Within peer debriefing, I interacted with a disinterested peer to ensure that my biases were kept in check while also allowing me an opportunity to test working hypotheses that I saw emerging in the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefing is “a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer’s mind” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308).

Member checking is another strategy to enhance the credibility of the research findings. In this study, the member checks took place in the form of a focus group that was conducted after the first two rounds of interviews were completed. According to Lincoln and Guba, “The member check, whereby data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with members of those stake holding groups from whom the data were originally collected, is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (1985, p. 314). Member checks serve to assess intentionality, allow the participants to immediately correct errors in facts, volunteer additional information, summarize, and confirm individual data points. Moreover, member checks account for researcher bias by confirming or disconfirming the developing theory.

Finally, Creswell (1998) stressed the importance of bracketing researcher bias to avoid a priori assumptions which may skew the analysis of the data. As previously described in the conceptual context, the researcher has had a number of personal experiences with first-year counseling students. These experiences have resulted in
several assumptions which include: (a) first-year counseling students have a period of change in which they realize that the program is different than what they had expected, (b) the first year in a counseling program is influential in their development as a counselor, and (c) students are affected by the use of different pedagogical techniques that may be new to them.

Transferability. In addition to establishing credibility, it is also important to establish transferability in qualitative research. In this study, the researcher made the sampling decisions, initial, and subsequent interview questions available upon request in order to “provide the data base that makes transferability judgments possible on the part of potential appliers” (p. 316). Transferability may be considered analogous to the concept of external validity in quantitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To accomplish transferability, the researcher “provides only the thick description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility” (p. 316). Furthermore, it is the researcher’s responsibility “to provide the data base that makes transferability judgments possible on the part of potential appliers” (p. 316).

Dependability and confirmability. In addition to establishing credibility and transferability, in order to establish trustworthiness, the researcher also had to ensure the dependability and confirmability of the research. For this study, the researcher maintained an audit trail that included the transcriptions of the interviews, the notes of the developing categories, properties, and dimensions of the data themes, and any process notes taken during the entire process. Dependability is concurrent with the quantitative
concept of reliability whereas confirmability is concurrent with the concept of objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Both dependability and confirmability were addressed by the use of a confirmability audit. The confirmability audit required an audit trail which includes raw data, data reduction and analysis products, data reconstruction and synthesis products, process notes, and materials relating to intentions and dispositions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Grounded theory procedures were appropriate for examining and developing a deeper understanding of the first-year experiences of counseling graduate students. In-depth interviews conducted with first-year students provides counselor educators insight into the development of these students and can assist educators with appropriate pedagogical techniques.

Conclusion

Grounded theory procedures were appropriate for investigating first-year counseling graduate students’ experiences during their first year in a counseling program. These procedures involved: (a) the development of the conceptual context, grand research question and the interview questions, (b) the data collection procedures, which includes participant selection and a description of the research site, (c) the data collection methods, (d) the methods of analysis, defining the role of the researcher, (e) the role of the researcher, and (f) establishing trustworthiness. A tentative theory was generated that was grounded in the students’ responses and provided a deeper understanding of first-year counseling graduate students’ experiences.
Chapter IV: Section I – First Round Interviews

Introduction

Nine first-year Master’s degree students from three different CACREP accredited universities were interviewed regarding their experiences as first-year counseling students. All nine participants were females ranging in age from 23 to 37 years. Eight participants described themselves as Caucasian while one described herself as Mexican-American. Three participants went directly from their undergraduate degree to the counseling program while the other six had anywhere from 1-15 years before they entered graduate school. Those individuals came from a variety of different fields including education, banking, and volunteering or subbing. Six of the participants’ concentration areas were school counseling while the other three were in community counseling.

The data derived from the first round of interviews were analyzed using open coding procedures. Open coding allowed for identification and categorization of concepts that emerged from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Subsequently the data was analyzed using axial coding to explore the relationships among the data in terms of the properties and dimensions.

Four major categories emerged from the analysis that represented the participants’ experiences as first-year Master’s degree counseling students. These categories described the various influences on the students during their first year, the personal meaning that was attributed to their experiences, the way in which the students conceptualized knowledge, and how the students appraised their competence as emerging counselors.
These categories were conceptualized as *influences, meaning-making, knowledge conceptualization*, and *competence appraisal*. These four categories were further broken down and analyzed at their property and dimensional levels. Axial coding revealed that relationships existed among the students’ experiences through their properties and dimensions. The categories and properties are evidenced by participants’ quotes. Throughout this chapter, the nine participants’ quotes are indicated P.X, with X indicating each of the nine participants by number.

**Influences**

*Influences* emerged as a category after the first round of interviews. Participants described professional and personal experiences that were deemed to be influential during their first year as counseling graduate students. Analysis of the *influences* category revealed three properties labeled *professor influences, peer influences, and self-affirmation influences*. The following statements describe *influences*.

P.4  You get to know the people...and you know the professors and it is not so structured. Like you know you feel like you can go and say, ‘I am having a problem with this...can you help me out?’ It is not so teacher-student. That has been really helpful for me.

P.7  During one of the role-plays with my partner, I don’t know if it will ever happen again but that point in time it went perfect. It was very much of a confidence booster. It helped so much to reinforce the fact that there are things that you really work to get but when you get down to it, you know how to do these things. That was very influential.

P.9  A new experience obviously and it is somewhat intimidating but not really because when you go into a class, there are people of all ages. It was such a mix of people that it made me feel more relaxed. That really made things better for me.
**Professor influences.** The participants discussed having experiences with their professors that were influential for them as first-year counseling students. These descriptions were used to create the property *professor influence.* *Professor influence* was described by specific statements regarding how professors are influential for the student during their first year. Examples of *professor influences* are:

- **P.8** My professor has been a big influence with me because I know he is new to the program here. He is very personable and very knowledgeable and some of the other professors, they just don’t seem to give you the information. He just really brings it down to my level.

- **P.8** And maybe if it wasn’t for him and other faculty who are warm and they understand you and can connect with you on the different levels with everybody coming from different backgrounds. I don’t think I would be as successful as I am now in the program.

- **P.4** You really get to work closer…one-on-one. You really have a richer experience with the professors.

- **P.9** The professors don’t treat you like ‘you are the student and I am the teacher.’ It is more of a friendship type of relationship…professionally.

*Professor influences* ranged along a dimension from perceptions of personal empowerment to perceptions of a disconnect, or inconsistency, among professors. One end of the dimension was labeled empowerment which included participants’ comments regarding the clinical experience of faculty members and the enthusiasm regarding the material in which they taught. Some examples of empowerment follow.

- **P.5** It makes a difference to have someone just meet you at your level and tell you that things are going to be okay and that you are going to learn what you are doing.

- **P.6** It helps too that some of the professors have actually been school counselors themselves. I think it is kind of more the wisdom and experience that is behind her that is influential for me.
He has empowered me that I can do this and I will do this.

I can see how excited they are to be in this field and how excited they get about the different jobs and everything. It makes me excited to get out there and start my own career.

The other end of the professor influences continuum included students’ perceptions of a disconnect between the professors both personally and with other professors in the department. Further, the participants describe perceived inconsistencies in expectations among their professors. Therefore, the lack of unity and differing expectations between the professors counters the empowering nature at the other end of the professor influences dimension. Some examples of the disconnect follow:

You don’t know how they are going to do the tests or what kind of grading criteria certain people want you to have. You know like certain people want really well written papers and other people look more for your grammar. It is kind of funny. Like APA, we have one professor who is a stickler for APA and it is like the majority of the points. Whereas another professor wants clear content and APA is the minimum thing they focus on.

I feel like the faculty is somehow or somewhat disjointed in terms of their expectations. I realize that they all operate from different perspectives but I don’t feel like there is a lot of unity within the program.

In the courses that we take and the content…a lot of the times there will be some cross over or chances to make connections between courses but I kind of doubt that the faculty even know that is going on.

Peer influences. A second property of the influences category was conceptualized as peer influence. Participants described how they were influenced by their peers during their first year as counseling students. The property peer influences was therefore depicted as participants’ perceptions regarding how their peers have had some
influence on their experience during their first year in the program. Some comments reflecting peer influences are:

P. 1 I mean the people that I have surrounded myself with are all just very positive people and that has really helped this year.

P. 9 I feel like everybody in the groups that I have been in have really worked together and I feel like I have gotten a lot from that.

Participants described influential experiences and interactions in which they felt their peers served as a community of support. This sense of community helped to support and encourage the students through the first-year experience of the counseling program. Therefore, supportive emerged as a dimension of peer influences in that the peers were influential during the students’ first year. Some examples of peer support are:

P.6 We all take the same classes together at the same time so at least you have some peer group to help you along.

P.2 I do have a mentor which is great…so it is nice to have that extra person to count on for information.

P.2 I feel like I am part of a community of students here, even though I drive about an hour to get here.

P.5 It is nice to know that everyone is kind of in this together.

P.4 I have made some really good friends and I like how open things are. I can just come in and ask questions and do what I need to do and feel comfortable.

On the other end of the continuum, the participants described interactions in which they felt that their peers were lackadaisical and halfhearted about the program. In addition participants included references to classroom attitudes and behaviors as examples of this type of behavior. Some examples of the lackadaisical perceptions include:
I certainly struggle with things and I am not perfect. I don’t like an attitude though where people think school needs to be easy. I don’t like laziness, intellectual laziness. It drives me crazy…and I see that in some of my classmates. That has been a very negative thing.

It really frustrates me and I guess some of the attitudes of some of the other students wanting it to be easy and wanting their hands held.

There has even been note passing and I just want to say ‘we are not in high school anymore. Don’t pass notes! Can you just pay attention for a couple of hours and not pass notes?’

Self-affirmation influences. A third property of the influences category was conceptualized as self-affirmation influences. Participants described how they internalized feedback and evaluations and described how that internalization had influenced their first-year experience in the counseling program. In other words, grades and evaluations of their ability as emerging counselors, given by professors and peers, were taken personally among the participants and seen as influential during the first year.

Some examples of self-affirmation influences are:

Like as much as they (professors) expect you to do these things at this point…have your work in on time, always be able to answer the questions, read all seven chapters, and everything be due tomorrow…and even though they are not going to sit and hold your hands while you do it, there is the expectation to do it and you know it. Because that is how you get your grade.

People say that they don’t want to admit they are driven by their grades but when you open up that sheet of paper and it has your grades on it…obviously you are able to tell yourself that yea, I did that.

The property self-affirmation influences varied along a dimension from positive to negative. Positive emerged as one end of the dimension along which self-affirmation influences varied. On the positive end of the continuum, participants described experiencing positive feelings when their techniques were successful or their abilities
were recognized by a professor. The statements made by others served to affirm their feelings about their abilities. Comments reflecting positive *self-affirmation influences* include:

**P.7** I actually made my partner feel better and stop crying. It was like an epiphany for me. I was like ‘wow, you actually know what you are doing.’

**P.2** All of my observations regarding the video…and my professor was like ‘I agree, I agree, I agree’ and that made me feel really good.

**P.1** Yeah, my first quarter I had some C papers and some B’s and last week in Lifespan I got a huge paper that is worth a third of my grade back and it was an A…yea! I can do this.

On the other end of the *self-affirmation influences* dimension, participants described being influenced based on negative feedback given by others. Participants described experiencing negative feelings when their techniques were critiqued or criticized. Further, negative feedback and low grades were internalized as very anxiety provoking. The statements made by others served to affirm their fears regarding learning new techniques. Comments reflecting negative *self-affirmation influences* include:

**P.6** Then you get your grades and it is not the best semester that you could have possibly had. So then going into your second semester you try to do it a little bit better but until those grades come out, you don’t know what is going to happen and what is not. Maybe I don’t know.

**P.1** I am still just so worried about what this professor thinks…I have been letting it control me.

**P.4** I had a professor that I looked up to and I mean when she evaluated me at the end of the first quarter…it was just all negative and nothing positive. So, that has stuck with me.

**P.1** When I get negative feedback, and no one likes negative feedback, that creates a lot of anxiety for me and sticks with me for a long time.
The first category influences contained three properties, professor influences, peer influences, and self-affirmation influences. Each property varied along a dimension that described the participants’ reactions and perceptions of the influences during the first year in a counseling program. Figure 1 illustrates the category of influences and its properties. Figure 1 also illustrates the dimensions of each property.

**Meaning-Making**

Meaning-making emerged as a second category in the analysis of the first round interview data. Participants described their experiences as first-year counseling students as meaningful in a variety of ways. Therefore, meaning-making is defined as the meaning participants attributed to their experiences as first-year students. Additionally, each of the properties of meaning-making illustrated how the participants made sense of their first year. Some examples of meaning-making are:

P.5  I didn’t care in high school and undergrad. I would go to class and talk to the professors...big deal. Now, I am grad school. You know this is the rest of my life. It is important.

P.9  I never liked night classes before but it is more intriguing to me; it is more what I want to learn about. I want to be an effective counselor.

Within the category of meaning-making, five properties emerged including professional involvement, motivation, sense of purpose, significance of degree, and time off before graduate school. Each property varied in its dimensions.

Professional involvement. One of the properties of meaning-making was described as professional involvement. Participants described experiences in which professors encouraged joining professional organizations such as the American
Figure 1. Category of first-year experiences: *Influences*. 
Counseling Association or Chi Sigma Iota, the International Counseling Honor Society. Participants also described experiences during national and state conferences as important and meaningful to their overall development as counselors. It is important to note that professional involvement did not contain any dimensions; therefore further exploration is needed. Examples of professional involvement include:

P.6 It was nice to feel that I was a part of a larger organization and a larger group of professionals. It was really neat to see all of the different ways that I can go within the profession. I liked that a lot. That was a good experience.

P.4 I know a lot of the faculty have really encouraged us to join the different associations…like ACA, OCA, or CSI. That is pretty important.

P.3 I got to hear from people in the field and also got to judge my reactions to things they were saying…which kind of helped me to identify sort of my identity as a counselor.

Motivation. A second property of meaning-making was conceptualized as motivation. Motivation in this sense described the experiences which participants recognized as meaningful. Participants conveyed motivational statements by describing experiences that surfaced early on in the counseling program as well as how meaning was attributed to the information they were taught in class. Participants also described motivational reactions when expressing their dedication to the program. Some examples of motivation are:

P.7 There are those times when I ask myself, ‘do you really know what you are doing?’ And it is just that time without even knowing it, you know what you want without knowing that that is happening. You say to yourself, ‘yea, this is what you want to do.’

P.6 I am a motivated person so to learn how to do these different things makes me feel good…that I am accomplishing something…doing something different…doing something important.
The *motivation* property varied along the dimension of educational and emotional meanings. At the educational end of the dimension, participants described the meaning that was attributed to learning new counseling techniques. Participants also described the importance of maintaining a safe environment to experiment with new counseling styles. Several quotes illustrate the educational dimension.

P.3 I am not a very directive person. You know…I am not…normally I am not very organized and I am not good at telling people that they need to do this or try that but is good for me to practice. I can see a need for that.

P.4 I feel like I have learned how to give feedback and to receive it. I think that has been the largest source of growth for me.

P.2 I feel like if I am told some information and I can sort of practice it right then and there because it is a safe environment. I like that because I feel safe to try.

P.5 It was uncomfortable at first but then I think it was really good because I was able to see that it was something that I could do.

P.9 I hate talking in front of the class…but now I find myself opening up more in classes and volunteering answers.

P.7 I am much more diligent with things and a lot more organized that I was before.

On the other end of the dimension was emotional meaning. At the emotional end of the continuum, participants described the meaning that was attributed to emotionally dedicating themselves to the counseling program. Some examples of the emotional dimension include:

P.6 I am willing to sacrifice to make it work…if it is something you really want to do, you are willing to do those things.

P.9 I don’t mind staying after if I have to because this is what I want to do.
I told my fiancé that I just love grad school. I think it is the greatest thing in the world. It is not like undergrad where you know…in undergrad there are a bunch of kids who do not want to be there…talking and not paying attention. I feel like here everyone wants to be here and they care about what they are doing.

I have had to change personally to be able to stay up to par with what I need to do.

Sense of purpose. A third property of meaning-making was conceptualized as sense of purpose. Sense of purpose was defined as the meaning participants attributed to obtaining a degree in counseling. Participants described the future with regards to attaining a Master’s degree and the benefits therein. Examples of sense of purpose include:

I would say that my first year has been really setting myself up for what I should be doing, what I need to be doing, and how I need to get there for the future.

It is kind of neat because it is the training for my career and that is exciting.

Sense of purpose varies along a dimension from experiences described as intrinsically rewarding to experiences described as extrinsically rewarding. Participants described intrinsic rewards regarding obtaining a Master’s degree in a helping field. Examples on the intrinsic end of the dimension include:

I came into the program knowing that I loved kids. I knew that I loved to help people. I knew that I was always the person who somebody would come up to say, ‘we need to talk.’ So I figured that that was what I needed to go into.

I mean my husband says that he sees that I am really happy and I don’t know…I feel like I finally have found the thing that I am supposed to do in life.
A good feeling, a good stress. To have a weight on your shoulders because I know that it is for a good purpose because eventually it will get me to where I want to be.

I would rather be in a counseling program than a program where it would just be me...like accounting or something. At least with counseling or education, it is for somebody else. I am going to help other people.

The other end of the *sense of purpose* dimension included experiences that were extrinsically rewarding. Participants described extrinsic rewards regarding obtaining employment. A couple of examples that illustrate the extrinsic end of the dimension include:

I am going to be able to take a lot from this program and use it in getting a job and having a job.

I want to make sure that when I do go out there, I am marketable. That I am going to be someone who they say ‘she is going to have a job.’

*Significance of a graduate degree.* The fourth property of *meaning-making* was conceptualized as *significance of a graduate degree.* *Significance of a graduate degree* was described as the feelings and perceptions regarding graduate work and the meaning attributed to being a graduate student. This property is similar to *sense of purpose* but differs in the sense that the meaning is attributed to the status of the Master’s degree whereas *motivation* described the meaning associated with obtaining a degree in counseling which is a helping field. Participants also described differences in meaning between undergraduate and graduate work. Examples of *significance of a graduate degree* are:

I really realize that grad school is important.

I really want the Master’s degree.
P.7 I like the graduate program so much more. It is so much more geared and concentrated to exactly what you want to do.

Significance of a graduate degree varied along a continuum from professional to personal. Participants described professional differences in terms of their expectations regarding their performance doing graduate level work. Examples of the professional end of the dimension include:

P.9 Graduate school has basically been me redirecting myself to get to the A and not the B…you know what I mean…to avoid B’s all together. I don’t mind B’s…they are not bad. But in graduate school, I have just been driven a lot more than I was before.

P.1 My performance in undergraduate school was okay, but not something that I was really proud of. I realized how much of a workload that you have and it is so much different than undergrad. So much different…and I knew it would be hard. And that is good, this degree should be hard.

The other end of the significance of a graduate degree dimension included personal accounts. Participants described the meaning of being in graduate school and obtaining a Master’s degree in regards to their families and friends. Examples of personal accounts are:

P.4 I mean I am the first one in my family to get a Master’s degree. So it is very important for them too.

P.6 I come from a family… I mean I am the first one from my family to graduate from undergrad let alone go back to school to get my Master’s degree.

Time off before graduate school. A fifth property of meaning-making was named time off before graduate school. Time off before graduate school was defined as any amount of time taken off between undergraduate training and graduate training. Participants described feelings and perceptions associated with being older than other
graduate students as well as descriptions of technology changes over time. *Time off before graduate school* did not contain specific dimensions. Rather, participants commented on their reactions to entering graduate school after taking some time off to pursue other avenues. Examples of the property *time off before graduate school* include:

P. 6 I was scared, I was scared to get back into school. I was scared because it had been two years.

P.1 I have been out of school for 15 years from undergrad, so I am trying…I have a lot more…I feel like I have a lot more at stake on a personal level because it has a different meaning to me.

P.2 Now that I am older, I want to do well. I mean I am here for the academic purpose not for the college experience and fun that I had in undergrad school.

P.1 It is challenging. I think it is more challenging to me than it is for the younger people because I have been away from technology…everything…the whole picture.

Data on the *time off before graduate school* property were limited which indicated a need for further exploration. Figure 2 illustrates the category of *meaning-making* and its properties, *professional involvement, motivation, sense of purpose, significance of a graduate degree, and taking time off before graduate school*. Figure 2 also illustrates the dimensions, if applicable, of each property.

**Knowledge Conceptualization**

*Knowledge Conceptualization* emerged as a third category in the analysis of the first round interview data. As participants described their experiences as first-year counseling graduate students, perceptions of the content they were learning, the method in which the content was taught, and the intensity of the material emerged as
Figure 2: Category of first-year experiences: *Meaning-making*. 
properties. Further, participants described their assumptions of counseling including both clinical and academic assumptions. Therefore, the category *knowledge conceptualization* was defined as the way in which participants conceptualized the knowledge they were obtaining during their first year in the counseling program both in terms of the content and the instruction. Analysis of *knowledge conceptualization* revealed five properties which were labeled *source of learning, instructor methods, information intensity, information assumptions, and information history*. Some quotations that illustrate *knowledge conceptualization* are:

**P.9** Even though some of the classes that I am talking about are three hours long, it didn’t feel like three hours at all. It went by really fast because we were constantly doing things or talking about it and everyone…I feel like…everyone…well most of my class was engaged and for me that is a really good way to learn.

**P.3** My partner and I this quarter…actually, we actually taped extra sessions because we felt like we were really learning a lot. And it is just helpful to be able to practice those skills considering that in the fall we will be doing it in our practicum for real.

**P.8** Well, what I have learned in the program I have been able to use it in different parts of my life.

*Source of learning.* One of the properties of *knowledge conceptualization* was identified *source of learning*. Participants described ways in which they preferred information to be presented to them during their first year in the counseling program. Specifically, *source of learning* can be defined as participants’ expectations and preferences regarding how class material is to be conveyed during the first year. Examples of *source of learning* are:

**P.3** I think that the program is good in that it draws us into counseling, the practice sessions right at the beginning…and I like that.
They share with us how to do it but so far we have only had one class like that…where we went back and forth with mock counseling sessions and then we have a group class where we do a mock group. That is it.

The comments reflecting the property source of learning had two dimensions which ranged from an orientation to detail to expectations of application. On one end of the dimension, participants described their desire to have more details and more concrete information presented to them during their first year. This dimension represented an orientation towards a didactic learning environment. Examples of this orientation to detail include:

P.1 There is just nothing solid about the first year. I am just getting the how-to’s of counseling but I am not getting anything about what my job will be like…or what I am going to have to actually do.

P.5 I am a very organized person so I don’t like this not knowing. I feel like my head is clouded.

P.9 Although I am a procrastinator, I am also very anal so I want to have everything on paper…what I am doing each step of the way.

P.4 It is frustrating because counseling is such a subjective field.

P.5 I feel like I am never getting, ‘here is what you are going to do.’ You know what I mean…it is just like…you are going to have to worry about this scenario or something like this…or what are you going to do…but it is never like, ‘ok, you are going to go to work and you are going to…’ I just feel like they are not telling me what my job description will be like.

P.1 I would have liked to have a little more direction.

The other side of the source of learning dimension included participants’ expectations of application. Expectations of application in this sense described the participants’ desire for the knowledge obtained during the first year to be applied to future settings and situations. Participants further described their expectations of
application in comments they made about the need to connect the material that they were learning to something within their personal reference. Participants’ expectations of application illuminated the desire to have more applied learning as opposed to a lecture-driven classroom. Expectations of application also described the participants’ reactions to the counseling taping session in which the counseling skills are being applied. Some quotations aptly illustrate this point.

P.3 I mean I actually like writing papers but I feel like so many of my classes are not…there is no engagement really. It is like three hours of Power Point and at the end ‘does anyone have any questions?’ I don’t benefit from that.

P.2 I understand that some of the classes it is hard to do…you know it is hard to have class participation and it needs to be more lecture-driven. But I guess I know myself and I just learn better by doing it and practicing it.

P.4 I know the other information is important but I guess it is just the way that it is presented. It just doesn’t…I just don’t make a connection with it.

P.3 You know in two of my classes this quarter I definitely felt like it I was challenged but the other two I felt like I never even had to try. And I did…I kept up with my reading and everything but I probably won’t remember it two months from now because I never did anything with it.

P.3 I just had to collect the information and put together a paper. I guess I thought it would be more application.

P.6 I mean it is weird because I know we were going to have to do papers and tests and I know we need to know the theories and you have to know what you are doing but the counseling itself, it kind of feels like we don’t get so much of that.

Instructor methods. A second property of knowledge conceptualization was labeled instructor methods. Instructor methods described the participants’ reactions to how the information was conveyed from the professors. Participants also provided descriptions regarding the relationship between instructor method and their
conceptualization of what they were learning. Additionally, participants described specific attitudes and behaviors that were related to instructor methods.

In describing instructor methods, participants did not give general descriptions or general reactions to the methods which the instructor employed in class. This lack of description indicated that more exploration was needed. However, the participants provided comments regarding their opinions on the specific instructor method as well as perceptions of their professors’ attitudes and how that was related to their knowledge conceptualization.

Instructor methods varied along a continuum from perceptions that professors were challenging to perceptions that professors, or their methods, were too easy. Participants described personal reactions to instructor methods that included descriptions of certain behaviors that were seen as important to the student during the first year in a counseling program. Examples of perceptions related to challenge include:

P.6 I have one professor who has pushed me to know that work is tough and has stated that he knows he is a tough teacher but I think I can learn the most from him.

P.5 So he is going to teach me the most and push me the hardest and it may not be pleasant all of the time but I really have learned a lot.

P.4 I want the one professor that I can learn the most from for my practicum, even though she is one of my hardest professors.

On the other end of the dimension included statements regarding the instructor methods being too easy. Participants described specific incidents that were conceptualized as too easy for graduate school. Examples of perceptions related to instructor methods being too easy include:
P.2 I think we are here to learn and I just don’t like open book tests. I guess that is what it comes down to.

P.4 She lets us use open notes for our quizzes and take home exams. And I am like…wow…we are in graduate school. I thought we were done with that in high school. So that has been really surprising.

P.3 It was maybe some of the lecture based classes that I feel like I didn’t absorb enough and then the tests were open book. So it felt like just an exercise to be there.

P.2 A couple of the classes, I felt that there was a little bit of hand-holding with the students in the class by the professor.

P.4 It is not just like you hear it and then you have an open book test about it. You just don’t learn from that.

Information intensity. A third property of knowledge conceptualization is described as information intensity. Information intensity is somewhat related to instructor method in that participants described their perceptions regarding the intensity of the program and professors. The differentiation between information intensity and instructor method is the participants’ perceptions of the actual intensity of the work rather than how the material is presented. Participants’ descriptions of information intensity included comments regarding information concerning the amount of work to be difficult and perceptions of professors’ attitudes regarding the intensity of their expectations. Further, participants also expressed their wish for, and satisfaction with, an adult learning environment. Examples of information intensity include:

P.6 My first semester, I was really overwhelmed because it was a lot more work that I had done before.

P.5 My classes are going well. They are not as scary as I thought they would be.

Participants’ descriptions of information intensity revealed three dimensions
ranging from low expectations of intensity, to high expectations of intensity, to a desired level of intensity. Expectations of intensity varied from high to low in terms of assumptions regarding the first year in a counseling program. Participants also made references to their desired level of intensity and how that was related to their knowledge conceptualization. Examples of information intensity where participants believed there was low intensity are:

P.5 I thought the whole program would be more demanding of me because that would be a lot more difficult than just looking up information and putting it together. I thought the whole program would be more challenging.

P.3 I thought the classes would be…not more work but more…I don’t know demanding of me intellectually.

P.2 I thought the classes would be harder. A few were…I thought a little too easy.

Participants also described the other end of the information intensity continuum which included descriptions of high intensity. These descriptions primarily were related to the work load. Examples of information intensity where participants believed there was high intensity include:

P.4 I expected more work load which I have gotten.

P.6 The first semester was really rough. I did a lot more work than I thought I would have to.

P.1 It is very intense. It is not just running groups and doing paperwork. There is a lot more involved.

The third dimension of information intensity described participants’ desire to be active participants in their own learning and be engaged in the classroom. Participants described experiences in which they felt like the learning environment was very adult-
oriented including a variety of different exercises and activities. Additionally, participants provided references to enjoying the practicality and usefulness of the material they learned in class. Examples of information intensity where participants believed the environment was conducive to adult learning include:

P.2 I feel like the manner in which the information was given to us was very engaging.

P.3 We have exercises during the class and we break up into little groups and talk about things or about a specific issue or practice something. I really like that part.

P.5 I really enjoyed doing the projects…and I don’t like doing projects. But I thought that that was really eye-opening and I learned how to do research and as a school counselor, I can apply that with my students some day.

P.6 It is much different. I really like that you don’t just sit in class where the professor talks at you; you are much more of an active member of your learning.

P.9 I like the classes where there is more of an adult learner type of situation.

P.3 I like the classes that require a lot of thinking, lots of active participation. I find that I learn much more from those classes.

Information assumptions. A fourth property of knowledge conceptualization was labeled information assumptions. Information assumptions described participants’ ideas regarding what counseling entailed. Ideas regarding what counseling involved included both assumptions regarding the counseling profession as a whole as well as the roles and responsibilities of counselors. These assumptions included ideas regarding what information would be presented in class and how the program would be conducted. An example of information assumptions is:
I think that it is probably like anything else. You have a little sliver of a view about something that you don’t know about. And once you learn it you learn that it is a whole different world you never knew.

Participants’ descriptions revealed that two dimensions existed for the information assumptions property in terms of how participants conceptualized the counseling profession as well as counselors themselves. Information assumptions included descriptions that detailed participants’ stereotypical general assumptions regarding what counseling is or what counselors do. Examples of general assumptions include:

P.1 I felt like when I came into the program, I would learn how to help people and give them advice…when really we are just facilitators to help empower clients.

P.8 I assumed that I was going to be analyzed all the time. That was what I was thinking when I started the program. I assumed that counseling was just sitting down and analyzing, talking, listening. I never realized there was so much to it.

P.5 I think my biggest assumption I made coming into counseling was we would have the answers. I guess now though I am learning that counselors are more empowering…that we are supposed to empower the client to find a resolution to their own problems.

On the other end of the dimension of information assumptions, participants described having previous experience with counselors. This previous experience helped to inform the participants about the roles and responsibilities of counselors. Additionally, participants described how they used their previous experience to conceptualize their knowledge in their first year. Examples of information assumptions from previous exposure to counselors include:
P.2 I like a lot of one-on-one interactions and counseling or even group counseling. Um…I knew that those things happened but not in the context of so often because my counselor never did that kind of stuff.

P.3 I mean I have been in counseling before myself, which kind of helped me to decide that I wanted to do this for a profession.

P.7 I realize I am going to have a lot of responsibility. I am going to have a whole lot more workload than I thought…like I am still learning right now that the picture in my head of what a school counselor did is not what a school counselor does anymore.

Information history. A fifth property of knowledge conceptualization was conceptualized as information history. Information history was defined as the amount of previous counseling knowledge that participants had prior to entering their first year in the counseling program. The differentiation between information history and having previous exposure to counselors is on an educational level. In other words, information history deals specifically with participants’ awareness of academic material relevant to the counseling program such as certain counseling theories.

Participants described their experience, or lack thereof, of the educational material covered during the first year in their counseling program. Therefore, information history was separated into two dimensions that ranged from having previous experience with the counseling material to having no previous knowledge. Examples of having previous experience include:

P.3 You know…so much of the content for some of the classes I have learned before…things like anybody who went through an undergraduate program would have had to take at least Psychology 101.

P.2 I think everybody has had exposure to Psychology and has learned about lifespan issues.
A lot of my classes I feel like I have taken before but this is just a higher level. So a lot of it is review which is really cool because I feel like I already know this stuff...so I don’t have to work as hard.

The other extreme of the *information history* dimension was no previous knowledge. Participants described experiences in which they did not have any awareness of what counseling was or the material that would be covered. Additionally, participants from differing backgrounds described their experience in their classes. Examples of no previous knowledge include:

I think that some of the professors might assume that you are in a graduate program and you should know this stuff by now. And maybe that is true for other master’s programs but for counseling…well you can have so many different bachelor’s degrees that are coming into it. I think the faculty need to have an understanding that not everybody is coming from a similar background…that we come from different backgrounds and that is important.

It was overwhelming because I don’t have a psychology background, I don’t have a social work background, I don’t have a sociology background. So for some thing that they say to you...you don’t know...but you are sitting in a class where 98% of the people have a psych background.

The third category labeled *knowledge conceptualization* contained five properties, *source of learning, instructor methods, information intensity, information assumptions, and information history*. The properties and dimensions of each property, if applicable, are illustrated in Figure 3.

*Competence Appraisal*

*Competence appraisal* emerged as a category after the first round of interview data. *Competence appraisal* was defined as the participants’ descriptions of their
Figure 3: Category of first-year experiences: Knowledge conceptualization.
perceived levels of competence as first-year counseling graduate students. Participants also made reference to their feelings and levels of self-efficacy about entering into the second year of the counseling program as well as their practicum and internship experiences. Additionally, the participants commented on their perceptions regarding time management as well as issues associated with perfectionism. Therefore, the category competence appraisal can be defined as the way in which participants conceptualize their competence as they experience their first year in the counseling program. Some quotations that illustrate competence appraisal are:

P.5 I am not going to be able to just listen. I am going to have to think about what I am going to say next. Like there is more to it than just listening...you have to have your mind going while someone else is talking. But I think I’ll be able to handle it.

P.8 It is like...you can’t get stressed out over the little things, you just have to laugh and know you are going to get through it.

Within the category of competence appraisal, three properties emerged including self-efficacy, time management, and perfectionism. The dimensions contained within each property, if applicable, are discussed.

Self-efficacy. The largest and most prevalent property of competence appraisal was conceptualized as self-efficacy. Self-efficacy included participants’ reactions and perceptions of their confidence regarding their competence as first-year counseling students. Additionally, participants provided reference to their feelings regarding their future practicum and internship experience and whether they felt adequately prepared. Therefore, self-efficacy was defined as the participants’ perceived levels of confidence regarding their competence as emerging counselors. An example of self-efficacy is:
P.4  I am a little nervous about my practicum. I am sure it will get better. I just think I was nervous when I did my undergrad practicum too but it got better.

Self-efficacy varied along a dimension of high self-efficacy to low self-efficacy levels. Participants discussed their feelings regarding their future experiences and discussed whether they felt prepared, which was conceptualized as high self-efficacy, to not feeling prepared, which was conceptualized as low self-efficacy. Some quotations aptly illustrate high levels of self-efficacy.

P.4  It is not like I am going to get thrown to the wolves by myself. I’ll be there with people that are going to help me. But it is just a little nerve-wracking.

P.7  I feel like I have learned a lot from my classes. I feel like I am being prepared and so I am excited about that.

P.1  I am going to jump in with two feet and do the best I can.

The other end of the self-efficacy dimension included participants with low levels of self-efficacy regarding their competence. Participants commented on the quickness of the program and their feelings regarding entering into practicum and internship. This low self-efficacy contained a large number of participant responses as evidenced by the number of quotes that follow:

P.5  It is a little nerve-wracking that I might be dealing with serious things that I would need to be able to help people.

P.7  I am really nervous about the internship and all of that because I have never actually been in a counseling setting and I feel like I am kind of thrown into that.

P.6  And to think it is only a two year program. Sure I am a first-year counseling student but next year I’ll be doing my practicum and my internship. So really a year is all you need? It is scary.
P.1 I am scared to do internship and stuff like that. So I worry too that I am not going to be any good at it.

P.5 You know you are going to have clients with very serious issues and you need to know what to do and what not to do. I’m scared.

P.6 I thought we were going to have more ‘this is what you do, this is what your session is’ but it really feels like you get thrown into your practicum and wow you are going to have to do this with a real student.

P.6 I feel that I am getting prepared to take the test. But I don’t know if I feel prepared to do the job.

Time management. A second property of competence appraisal was conceptualized as time management. Participants described time management as the amount of time consumed by graduate school as well as balancing time between school and other activities. Examples of time management include:

P.8 It is a lot of learning how to manage your time...juggling your time.

P.4 So school is 20 hours a week, plus I work 40 hours a week. I have to work to stay on my health insurance. It is a lot of moving your time around.

Time management varied along a continuum of feeling overwhelmed to seeing the workload as manageable. Participants described balancing school work with other activities and having to prioritize activities to get things completed on time. Examples of feeling overwhelmed with the time include:

P.6 I wish I could be more involved but because it is grad school and I am married, I also have to work and take care of my house.

P.4 Everybody told me that I was going to have to read and read and then in one class you will have to read 100 pages by next week...and the other class you have to read 150 pages...it is a hard balance to do because I live at home and there are expectations to see my family. Plus I work 20 to 30 hours a week, I go to school full time, and I also have a boyfriend and friends.
P.7 It is really, really overwhelming to me. And pretty much a lot of my classes...I haven’t slacked in them but I haven’t given as much attention to them because of how much of a workload this one class is.

P.8 It is a lot of time management because I often think to myself, gee it would be really nice if I wasn’t teaching full time...if I wasn’t working on the weekends...if I didn’t have five elementary kids that I tutor every week...on top of going to school at night. It is crazy.

On the other end of the time management dimension participants viewed the workload as manageable. Participants described how over time they had acclimated to the workload of graduate school. Comments regarding the work load as being manageable include:

P.5 Grad school is not half as much work as I thought it would be. There is a lot to it but I guess I expected to be studying all of the time. I still have time for myself.

P.4 I know more about what is expected and the fact that I am actually taking a couple more credits than I was last semester. I find myself handling it a lot better.

P.7 You adjust to it...like you get used to it. I will be the first one to admit that I am a procrastinator but I found out that I can’t do that anymore.

P.5 I signed up for five classes and I thought, I am not going to be able to work...I’ll be busy like crazy...but it really wasn’t. I really loved it, it went very well. The workload is nothing like I expected it to be.

Perfectionism. A third property of competence appraisal is described as perfectionism. Participants described their personal expectations to remember everything and do everything correctly. Participants also described the feelings associated with forgetting information or performing techniques inaccurately. Examples of perfectionism include:
In my methods class… it was probably the first reality check. Even though I was there with a classmate and it was a role-play I kept thinking, ‘I am not doing this right, I am not doing this right.’

I expect myself, I push myself really hard. And I expect myself to remember things. I just don’t want to forget something that is vital the whole way through.

You know, you need to be the best at your craft. You know you want to have everything right.

Data on the perfectionism dimension were limited, indicating a need for further exploration. Figure 4 illustrates the category of competence appraisal and its properties, confidence rating, time management, and perfectionism. Figure 4 also illustrates the dimensions, if applicable, of each property.

Triangulation

Triangulation procedures were utilized during the first round of analysis to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the data. Denzin (1970) described triangulation as collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings while also using a variety of methods in order to reduce the risk that your conclusions reflect only the biases or assumptions made by the researcher. According to Denzin (1978), there are a variety of basic triangulation techniques including data triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation, and methodological triangulation. For the purposes of this study, three main triangulation procedures were utilized following the first round of interview data: data triangulation, investigator triangulation, and theory triangulation.
Figure 4: Category of first-year experiences: Competence appraisal
Data Triangulation

Data triangulation is the use of a variety of data sources in a study (Denzin, 1978). Gathering information from a diverse range of individuals reduces the risk of systematic biases (Maxell, 1996). This study employed data triangulation by involving participants from a variety of institutions located in Ohio. Interviewing students in different programs, as well as different geographic locations, helped to make the data findings and category conceptualization more credible because it allowed for and utilized multiple perspectives.

Investigator Triangulation

Denzin (1978) described investigator triangulation as using several different researchers or investigators throughout the analysis of the first round of interview data. This occurred by consulting with two faculty members during the open coding and axial coding process in order to compare and check the data collection and interpretation. Consulting with these faculty members at every stage of the research produced a greater likelihood for an increase in objectivity and a decrease in researcher bias.

Theory Triangulation

In addition to utilizing data triangulation and investigator triangulation, theory triangulation was employed with the first round of interview data. Theory triangulation involved the use of multiple perspectives to interpret a single set of data (Denzin, 1978). Theory triangulation involved comparing interview data with two existing theories, Karl Weick’s sensemaking theory and constructivism.

Sensemaking and constructivist theory. Karl Weick’s (1995) sensemaking theory describes how individuals professionally develop by making sense of their new
experience. Sensemaking is grounded in both individual and social activity. Weick described that engaging in sense-making is to “construct, filter, frame, and render the subjective into something more tangible” (p. 14). Further, sensemaking is concerned with individuals making retrospective sense of situations in which they find themselves. The core of Weick’s sensemaking theory consists of seven properties or characteristics. These seven characteristics include: (a) grounded in identity construction, (b) retrospective, (c) enactive of sensible environments, (d) social, (e) ongoing, (f) focused on and by extracted cues, and (g) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick, 1995).

Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2005) described sensemaking as a “sequence in which people concerned with identity in the social context of other actors engage in ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively, while enacting more or less order into those ongoing circumstances” (p. 409). In other words, individuals in a social context interpret or make sense of new experiences by viewing previous experiences in new ways. Weick et al. (2005) stated that sensemaking works to organize instability or flux, starts with noticing and bracketing, is concerned with labeling, is retrospective, concerns presumption, is social and systemic, is about action, and works to organize through communication.

In reviewing Weick’s theory of sensemaking many parallels exist between sensemaking theory and constructivist theory. The concept of sensemaking parallels constructivist theory in that it is based upon both developmental constructivism and social constructivism (McAuliffe, 2001). Developmental constructivism derives from Piagetian developmental tradition in which learners evolve their capacities over time to
make sense and meaning out of experiences (McAuliffe, 2002b). Further, it has been argued that “no meaning is made outside of a social context; there is no meaning “out there” to be found; we are always formed by our social context” (McAuliffe, 2002b, p. 5). Thus constructivist theory is derived from both a developmental and social perspective.

Constructivist theory has recently gained more attention within the field of counselor education. Constructivism has been defined as the “notion that our beliefs and assumptions, many of which are theoretical and many of which are grounded in data, are products of the meanings that we make in our social contexts” (Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998, p. 77). Constructivism is a way of thinking that is based on actively creating a reality that is, or can be, social in nature, questioned, evaluated, and possibly reformulated (McAuliffe, 2002b). In other words, cognitive constructivism is said to “emphasize second-order changes, a progressive, hierarchic construction of models of reality whereby experience is shaped into cognitive schemas or representations that serve to facilitate explanations of the world and predictions of events” (Thomas, 1996, p. 531).

Sensemaking theory and constructivist theory consist of many parallels and similarities. Comparing the data with existing theories served to check for consistencies and inconsistencies with the findings of the interview data. Several important concepts surfaced from the first round of interviews that were consistent with the literature and existing theory. It is important to note that the characteristics of Weick’s sensemaking theory as well as the elements of constructivism are not mutually exclusive. Therefore,
the elements of both theories, as well as the emergent categories and properties, consist of overlap and areas in which more than one concept makes sense.

The first characteristic of Weick’s sensemaking theory included experiences being grounded in identity construction. Weick stated, “Identities are constituted out of the process of interaction” (p. 20) as well as “simultaneously redefined based on the conduct of others” (p. 23). Weick’s characteristic of sensemaking being grounded in identity construction parallels the category *influences* which addressed the professional and personal experiences that students described to be influential to them during their first year. Influential experiences were based on interactions between professors, peers, as well as the students themselves. A property of *influences* described as *self-affirmation influences* illustrated the way in which the students personally perceived evaluations from professors and themselves and how that was influential to the students’ perceptions of their abilities. In other words, participants’ comments revealed that professors’ comments were extremely important as they were constructing their identities as first-year counseling students.

Similar to Weick’s identity construction, when participants spoke about how previous experiences in undergraduate school influenced their current experience and understanding of the material, it paralleled constructivist principles which state that our identity is based upon previous experiences as well as environmental cues. The *knowledge conceptualization* category, specifically the *information history* property, illustrated that participants used previous experience to assist in understanding and making sense of what they were learning. The constructivist perspective acknowledges
that knowledge is not something that is transferred or processed but rather incorporated into a known reality (Fosnot & Perry, 2005). Previous knowledge of counseling, both academically and personally, assisted students in gaining an awareness and constructing an understanding of how what they were learning fit into their existing frame of reference.

Constructivists also believe that “all living systems are necessarily self-referential” (Mahoney, 1991, p. 393). This concept can be directly linked to Weick’s idea of sensemaking being grounded in identity construction. Further, the category meaning-making exemplified the idea of using personal contexts to make sense or construct meaning into experiences. For example, participants discussed their sense of purpose for entering a counseling program. Participants provided accounts of the intrinsic motivators for wanting to be a counselor and gaining a sense of purpose. The meaning attributed to being in a counseling program was constructed based on their personal motivators which in turn influenced their identity as burgeoning counselors. Additionally, the property significance of a graduate degree is also an example of constructing meaning of a present experience based upon one’s previous reality. The participants discussed wanting to try harder and dedicating themselves more within the first year of graduate school, as opposed to their performance in undergraduate school, because of the meaning that graduate school had for them.

Weick (1995) described his second characteristic in his sensemaking theory as retrospective. Retrospective sensemaking originally derived from Schutz’s (1967) analysis of a “meaningful lived experience.” Retrospective sensemaking highlights the
“lived” experience insomuch as “the past tense captures the reality that people can know what they are doing only after they have done it” (Weick, 1995, p. 24). It is important to note that retrospective experiences can be either of “pure duration, which has no boundaries or differentiations” or as “discrete segments” (p. 25). Because the participants have continually experienced their first year, retrospective sensemaking includes both sensemaking throughout the first year and the meanings associated with specific events. Pure duration is difficult to illustrate because it has no fixed boundaries; however participants mentioned their assumptions and expectations coming into their first year and how over time they had adjusted and acclimated to the program. Further, the significance of a graduate degree revealed that participants were not attributing meaning to a specific segment but rather the program in its entirety. Conversely, participants readily discussed specific events or incidents that they deemed to be influential or particularly meaningful to them. Examples included in the knowledge conceptualization category revealed specific instructor methods that students mentioned to be either helpful or not helpful. The participants used those methods as “discrete segments” to make sense and meaning of their experiences.

Meaning is created by experiencing and experiences. Constructing meaning, however, focuses on what has already been experienced to construct what one is currently experiencing. Therefore, whatever experience is happening at a given moment will be influenced on previous personal experiences. In other words, even though creating meaning can be done both from the past and the present, it requires past experiences to make sense of the present.
The categories of meaning-making and knowledge conceptualization that surfaced following the first round of interviews had similar characteristics to the idea of retrospective sensemaking. Properties within meaning-making such as motivation and significance of the graduate degree exemplified the retrospective act of sensemaking in that both properties included statements about past experiences. Further, the participants discussed how their ideas of the first year changed from the beginning of the program to their current experience. Properties within knowledge conceptualization such as intensity experience and information assumptions also illustrated retrospective sensemaking. The participants described their assumptions regarding the actual program as well as the content that was taught and how their assumptions had changed from the beginning of the year. Feelings such as being overwhelmed and anxious tended to diminish as the year progressed which illustrated how the participants were making sense of their experience based on their previous feelings.

Concurrently, constructivism states that individuals are seeking to increase their repertoire of reality which consists of past experiences as well as current ones (Kelly, 1963). Cobb (2005) stated, “Students actively construct their ways of knowing as they strive to be effective by restoring coherence to the worlds of their personal experience” (p. 39). In this case, the participants actively constructed their reality and attributed meaning by attempting to restore coherence to the information they were taught and assimilate it with previous experiences.

The third characteristic of Weick’s sensemaking theory is labeled “enactive of sensible environments” (p. 30). This characteristic focuses more on the action of
“making” as opposed to the first two characteristics which focus more on the “sense” of sensemaking. Enactive in sensible environments suggests that individuals are very much a part of their own environments and that “making” is crucial for sensemaking. By individuals making sense of their environments, they create, or enact a part of that very environment. Thus the individual has incorporated his or her own reality into the environment.

This concept is very similar to the idea of constructivism in that constructing reality is a never-ending process. When one is speaking about the process of experiencing something, it is important to remember “there is no result of process only a moment in process. In other words, thoughts, cause-effect, stimulus-response, and subject-object are simply descriptions of moments in a process” (Cobb, 2005, p. 33). Therefore, as counseling students experience their first year in a new environment, they bracket groups of time or certain classes together to attempt to create meaning. By doing this, the students can reflect on their first year and attribute sense to their overall experience.

This characteristic of sensemaking is evidenced in the first round of interview data. For example, the influences category included statements regarding peer influences. Participants’ experiences with their peers ranged along a continuum of supportive to lackadaisical and the participants described how certain events in class at certain times influenced how they made sense of their experience in the counseling program. For example, one participant described how peers in a certain class bullied a professor into making an exam open book. The participant further revealed how that incident influenced
how she perceived the professor in the future. Therefore, the participant made sense out of that experience and environment by bracketing a specific incident.

The fourth characteristic of Weick’s sensemaking theory is described as social. The social characteristic reminds us that sensemaking is not achieved in isolation. People create and maintain sense through the development of a common language and everyday social interactions (Weick, 1995). During the first year in a counseling program, emerging counselors begin to learn the jargon of the counseling profession in addition to the lingo used by fellow graduate students and professors. Words such as “overwhelming,” “anxiety,” and “empowering” were prevalent throughout the interviews for all of the participants. However, it is important to note that although individuals can share a common language, one can never say whether or not two people define a specific term or construct in the same way (von Glasersfeld, 2005). The shared language or experiences may be compatible but it is unreasonable to assume that they are the same.

Social constructivism can also be related to the social characteristic of Weick’s sensemaking theory. Constructing realities based upon previous experiences is not achieved by oneself. Rather, social interactions are used to help construct one’s reality as well as base what one believes regarding a given phenomenon (Fosnot & Perry, 2005). The social nature of constructivism can be directly related to the peer influence property of the data. Participants continually discussed the influence peers had as they reflected on their first year. This information regarding both Weick’s theory of sensemaking and constructivist theory lends credibility to the first round of interview data.
The fifth characteristic of Weick’s (1995) theory is the ongoing nature of sensemaking. Sensemaking has no beginning or ending point because pure duration of time never stops. “People are always in the middle of things, which become things, only when those same people focus on the past from some point beyond it” (p. 43). For the purposes of this study, the participants’ experiences do have a beginning and end point; however their construction of reality is ongoing with a component of their reality consisting of beginning and experiencing their first year in a graduate program in counseling.

Constructivist theory also affirms that sense making is a process that is ongoing. Fosnot and Perry (2005) stated, “learning is a constructive building process of meaning making which results in reflective abstractions…these symbols then become part of the individual’s repertoire…which in turn are used when perceiving and further conceiving” (p. 31). Therefore, the participants’ learning is an ongoing process throughout their first year and into the future.

The ongoing nature of sensemaking can be related to the category competence appraisal. Participants made reference to their perceived current competence and related it to their future experiences. Even though the first year of graduate school is bound by a beginning and ending date, the participants made sense of their experience and the techniques that were learned by incorporating their own reality into their experience. As previously mentioned, the students are currently experiencing their first year; thus meaning is presently being associated with specific experiences and events. This active, ongoing process of sensemaking can be related and paralleled to the participants’ pure
duration of experiences. Another example of the ongoing nature of sensemaking is the category *influences*. In describing the property *self-affirmation*, participants made comments regarding using natural skills in a counseling session. Natural skills, those not taught in any classes, can be related to incorporating one’s own reality into the counseling session. Participants were able to make sense of the session by utilizing their own realities.

Similar to the idea of ongoing sensemaking, Weick’s theory states that sensemaking is focused on and by extracting cues. Weick (1995) states, “Extracted cues are simple, familiar structures that are seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring” (p. 50). These cues link together both abstract and concrete cues and are used to make sense of an action by using a familiar point of reference. Context is an important element in extracting cues from an environment. The context affects what is extracted as well as affects how the extracted cue is interpreted. Details in an environment can be very influential in determining sense of an experience.

Concurrently, constructivist theorists hold the same belief that people link together past experiences or cues and use them as a point of reference for the future. Individuals’ previous experiences are influential to how knowledge and their understanding of their realities are formulated. Additionally, context is important in associating experiences.

This characteristic of focusing on and extracting cues can be related to the *influences* category. The idea of focusing and extracting cues is almost the very essence of the *influences* category because participants described how their professors and peers
have made a difference in their first year. Also, a fair amount of participants compared their experience during their first year to experiences they had in their undergraduate training. Because all of the participants are graduate students, they could link their current experiences with professors and peers to those in their undergraduate work. Further, the participants’ ideas of evaluation and feedback were based on their previous experiences of obtaining grades.

*Knowledge conceptualization* is also similar to focusing on and extracting cues. Some participants had previous exposure to counselors and had an idea of what the counseling process entails. This point of reference helped to guide those participants in conceptualizing the material learned in class. Their previous exposure to a counselor provided them with a link to incorporate into their reality of being first-year counseling students.

The final characteristic of Weick’s sensemaking theory states that sensemaking is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. Sensemaking “takes a relative approach to truth, predicting that people will believe what can account for sensory experience but what is also interesting, attractive, emotionally appealing, and goal relevant” (Fiske, 1992, p. 879). Therefore, in sensemaking, it is not as important to make sure perceptions are accurate but rather that perceptions are plausible within their given reality. In describing their experiences, the participants reflected on their own constructed realities to make sense of their experience as first-year counseling students. Whether their reflections were true and accurate was of less concern than the emotions, feelings, and perceptions associated with their reflections. Additionally, it is not possible to test the
participants’ emotions, feelings, and perceptions for accuracy. That is why plausibility is an important element in sensemaking.

*Researcher Observation Notes*

In addition to the theory triangulation described above, researcher observation notes were used as a triangulation method. Researcher notes assisted in obtaining an analytical distance from the data that was imperative in helping the researcher maintain a level of objectivity in the data conceptualization (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Immediately following the individual interviews, the researcher made notes regarding the participants’ demeanor during the interview process including the participants’ behavior and affect towards the interview questions and the content therein. The researcher notes dealt specifically with the participants’ conduct.

Researcher observation notes supported the four categories that were conceptualized from the first round of interview data. The researcher observed the participants’ affect becoming aroused as they described the *influences* category. For example, the participants exhibited contentment when issues such as *professor influence* were discussed specifically when they perceived the professors to be empowering. On the other hand, participants’ affect became frustrated when they spoke about the inconsistent expectations of professors. Further, participants displayed signs of happiness and relief when they discussed the positive dimension of *peer influences*. On the other hand, participants became visibly frustrated and annoyed when discussing the lackadaisical dimension of *peer influences*. 
The researcher observed similar responses to issues associated with the meaning-making category. Several participants felt personal responsibilities to become counselors and that sense of purpose was very important to them. Additionally, the researcher observed a feeling of excitement regarding those who spoke about the significance of a graduate degree. Participants exhibited a sense of fulfillment regarding whether the graduate degree was perceived either as a professional or personal accomplishment.

Moreover, the researcher also observed a variety of responses as the participants spoke about their knowledge conceptualization. Most of the participants made references to how they preferred to learn that included specific strategies such as experiential activities or hands-on learning. Participants also discussed their desired classroom structure as one that included active participation and discussion. Some participants exhibited annoyance and anger as they reflected on the intensity experience being too low. As students expressed their opinions regarding open-book tests, the researcher observed the students become aggravated. Conversely, the researcher observed the participants’ pleasure when they felt that their teachers were treating them as adults and held high expectations for them.

Finally, the researcher notes supported the conceptualization of the category competence appraisal. The researcher made observations as the participants spoke about future experiences such as practicum and internship experiences. Participants’ affect shifted from that of a confident learner and emerging counselor to one that was more timid and anxious. Further, self-efficacy influenced how they conceptualized their own competence levels.
Researcher Memos

In addition to the researcher notes, memos were made during the process of the first round of interview analysis. Memos “contain the researcher’s impressions, thoughts, and directions” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.223). Memos are different than researcher notes in that memos pertained to the participants’ demeanor and affect during the interview while the researcher notes dealt more specifically with the concepts emerging from the data analysis. These memos were utilized to bracket the researcher’s assumptions as the data was being analyzed. Further, these memos were discussed with the researcher’s advisor to assist in checking any preconceived notions regarding the first-year students’ experiences.

Memos made during the analysis of the first round of data revealed that participants’ experiences were socially constructed and participants attributed meaning to the activities in which they were engaged during the first year. Further, memos supported the conceptualization that participants were actively trying to make sense of their experience. This support is evidenced in both the influences and meaning-making categories. Additionally, the memos supported the category of knowledge conceptualization in that the researcher noted how different teaching styles, the intensity with which the information was presented, and whether the participant had any previous exposure to a counselor influenced how the information learned during the first year was conceptualized and incorporated into the participants’ realities. The researcher also observed the participants as they rated their levels of competence based on their personal
levels of self-efficacy Therefore, this observation supported the category of competence appraisal.

Conclusion

A variety of triangulation methods were employed during the analysis of the first round of interview data. The researcher implemented data triangulation, investigator triangulation, and theory triangulation. Further, researcher observation notes and memos were used to triangulate the initial categories, properties, and dimensions.

A tentative understanding of the experiences of nine first-year Master’s degree counseling students emerged following the first round of interview data. Four major categories were conceptualized from the analysis that represented the participants’ experiences including influences, meaning-making, knowledge conceptualization, and competence appraisal. These categories described the various influences on the students during their first year, the personal meaning that was attributed to their experiences, the way in which the students conceptualized knowledge, and how the students appraised their competence as emerging counselors. Further, axial coding revealed that relationships existed among the students’ experiences through their properties and dimensions. Figure 5 illustrates the four categories including the properties and dimensions.
*Figure 5.* Categories and properties after first round of data analysis.
Chapter IV: Section II – Second Round Interviews

Introduction

As previously mentioned, several of the properties within the categories were limited which indicated a need for further exploration. Within the category meaning-making, there was limited data regarding professional involvement. Therefore, a second round question was designed to ascertain information regarding the meaning behind professional involvement. However, because only a few participants spoke about being involved with professional organizations and those descriptions only contained positive comments, the second round question was exploratory and reflective in nature. The question was:

- I’d like you to reflect on your experience as a first year student. How have you come to understand what it means to be a counselor? Have faculty helped with this?

In addition, data within the time off before graduate school property of meaning-making was limited. In order to gather information regarding the meaning associated with going to graduate school directly from undergraduate training versus taking time off before returning to graduate school, an exploratory question was designed that considered both perspectives. Therefore, the second round question that was asked was:

- How did the time in which you decided to enter graduate school affect your experience during the first year?

A third area in which further exploration was needed included the issue of perfectionism within the competence appraisal category. This exploratory question was
designed to check whether students’ perceptions of their competence were truly *perfectionistic* or if they described their personal expectations as something different than perfectionism. Therefore the second round question was:

- What did you expect of yourself as a first-year counseling student? Have you fulfilled your expectations?

The final question in the second round interviews was designed to examine students’ experiences from a programmatic perspective. Throughout the first round of data analysis, participants discussed individual reactions and perceptions regarding a variety of different elements of the first year. In addition, participants spoke about the counseling program and components of the program which they liked and disliked. While gathering information regarding the participants’ experiences, repeated comments regarding the program surfaced. Consequently, further exploration into the students’ perspectives of the program was needed to ascertain how the program influenced the students’ descriptions of their experiences. Therefore, the last second round question was:

- I’d like to ask you about your program and how it has affected you. What have been the best aspects of your program and what do you believe needs improvement?

Following the completion of the first round of interviews and data analysis, the same nine participants were interviewed again in order to provide clarification and further explanation of the categories, properties, and dimensions that emerged from the first round of interview data. Each interview took place in the same context as the first
interview. The second round of interviews took place near the end of the participants’ first year in the counseling program.

The first round of interview data analysis resulted in emergent categories, properties, and dimensions that described the participants’ first year in a counseling program. Four categories emerged from the first round of interviews including: *influences, meaning-making, knowledge conceptualization*, and *competence appraisal*. Following the analysis of the first round of interviews, several properties required additional exploration and clarification.

The second round of data collection was utilized to clarify existing categories, properties, and dimensions synthesized from the first round of interviews. The second round interviews also provided the researcher an opportunity to member-check the initial round of analysis with the participants. Additionally, the data provided descriptions regarding the participants’ perceptions of the counseling program itself. The analysis of the second round of interview data served to clarify and thickly describe the categories that emerged from the initial round of data analysis. These descriptions served to confirm and saturate the categories and properties that emerged from the first round of data analysis.

In addition to confirming and clarifying the emergent categories and properties, the second round of interview data analysis assisted in the reconceptualization of several properties. This reconceptualization was a result of additional clarifying information that was attained through the design of the second round of interview questions. Finally, following the second round of data analysis, participants’ responses regarding
programmatic issues associated with the first year in the counseling program were conceptualized. Axial coding revealed that participants’ descriptions supported the relationships between the four conceptual categories through their respective properties and dimensions.

*Constructivist Sense-Making Process*

_Constructivist sense-making process_ emerged as the contextual category in which all of the initial categories were conceptualized and organized. _Constructivist sense-making process_ was defined as the process in which participants progress in order to make sense of their first year in the counseling program. _Constructivist sense-making process_ is based upon an individual’s previous experiences as well as their personal expectations. The process included the different ways in which individuals in the counseling program influenced the participants’ experiences as first-year students. The contextual category was further conceptualized as the process the participants used to make sense of their experiences as first-year counseling students as well as how they attributed meaning to their experiences. Additionally, _constructivist sense-making process_ described participants’ understanding of the information they were learning and the methods used to teach that information.

Participants’ descriptions described _constructivist sense-making process_ as both an individual and social process whereby reflecting on the first year produced reactions regarding their sense of purpose and their motivating drive to be in a counseling graduate program. This category was also conceptualized as participants’ perceived levels of competence as first-year counseling students. Participants’ descriptions further revealed
that *constructivist sense-making process* filters through all of the other categories and properties.

P.3  I think about last quarter when we did the group process thing. When we first started out, I couldn’t really figure it out...what it was all about. But now I kind of see it. I mean I see the idea behind it and I see why it is important. And a lot of people complained that we had to get together in groups but I don’t know any other way that we could have learned it. And the program did a good job of giving us that experience while keeping things relatively safe.

P.9  I feel much more focused and I see more value of being in class. Like I said before, I just never did before in undergrad. I knew that it was important to be there but it wasn’t my priority. Now I will not go to work if I have something to do with school. I will flex my work time somehow whereas before work was more important.

P.4  I think about undergrad and I didn’t make any close relationships with anyone really. Everybody here is so close and so friendly and everybody is really nice. People make a point to say hi. I feel like I have built a lot of really close relationships. That has really helped me because I can call one of them if I need help or vice versa. That is probably one of the most positive things about this first year. I feel like I have made connections ten times better than I ever did in undergrad and that has helped me tremendously to get through this first year.

P.8  Without the professors that I have, I would not know anything. They give us approaches, role-playing opportunities, and examples. It all really puts it into perspective and really puts it on an understandable level. It is not so much lecturing and taking notes, but really saying, ‘in this situation, this is what you might want to do,’ or they bounce it off the students by saying, ‘how would you handle it?’ That really gets my mind thinking...sort of putting myself into that situation and letting me put what is in my head to good use.

P.7  I really came into the program with high expectations, very high expectations because in undergrad...well when I first started, I slacked off with all of the general elective classes. I didn’t care. But as I went through and graduated I realized I could have had a higher GPA if I would have got down to it initially. So when I came into this program knowing that it was a master’s program, I was determined that I was going to have a 4.0 GPA. I was going to push myself and do the best I could possibly do and
thus far it has actually held true. So I am very proud of that. I am proud of all of the things I have done throughout this first year.

P.2 I think I have learned more about myself in this first year than I thought I would have. I had had counseling before I entered this program and that was very eye-opening to me to just take a step back and look at myself differently. But that happened here too. Not that I thought I had myself totally figured out but I have really learned about myself in this whole process.

Figure 6 illustrates constructivist sense-making as the contextual category in relation to the other categories influences, meaning-making, knowledge conceptualization, and competence appraisal.

Influences

The second round of interview data analysis confirmed the influences category. Influences were described as professional and personal experiences that were deemed to be influential during the first year as counseling graduate students. Participants described various influences during their first year and made comparisons to previous experiences in an attempt to make sense of why they deemed certain individuals or events as being influential. Further, the participants provided deeper descriptions of influential experiences and noted the importance of certain events throughout their first year.

P.9 The whole program, it is like a family. Everybody is working together to get on the same page with the new people entering the program and with those students who are leaving. I think they want the program to flow and they have been working on transitioning it to make the whole experience better. That has been so helpful for me.

P.3 I would say this year has affected me a great deal. I definitely see myself connecting more with classmates who entered at similar times in their lives.

The influences category consisted of three properties that were supported
Figure 6. Contextual category: Constructivist sense-making process category in relation to the other categories.
and confirmed with the analysis of the second round data. The properties were labeled 
professor influences, peer influences, and self-affirmation influences.

Professor influences. Participants described a variety of ways their professors 
were influential to them during their first year in their counseling program. Participants’ 
responses during the second round of data analysis confirmed the professor influence 
property. An example of professor influence includes:

P.6 The teachers are there because they have experience. They tell you their 
real-life experiences, you know, ‘oh when I first started, I made this 
mistake. Try not to make this.’ “It is okay if you are thinking more about 
yourself than your client during that first session.” When they give you 
their life experience that really helps…you know, you realize that you are 
not the only person…they’ve been through it.

The property professor influences contained two dimensions. Participants 
described the empowering nature of professors and how that encouragement was influential for them as first-year counseling students. Participants’ descriptions served to 
strengthen the dimension of empowerment by providing comments about the clinical 
experience of faculty members and the enthusiasm regarding the material they taught. 
The participants’ descriptions provided a thick, rich description for this end of the 
continuum.

P.2 My advisor has been very helpful. She has a lot of experience and just in 
my personal contact with her I get an idea of what it is going to be like to be a counselor.

P.7 The faculty, especially the two that I have had the most contact with, have 
helped me a lot. They have helped me to understand what I am doing right 
and what I am doing wrong. They don’t over-criticize me to the point 
where I think I am not doing anything right. Rather, they are very 
encouraging individuals who I have learned a lot from.
P.6 There is this one professor who is actually a school counselor. He talks a lot to the school counselors about what the job is going to be like and the rules that we are going to have to follow in the schools. That has really helped me to view what we are going to be doing and who we are going to have to deal with.

P.4 Faculty have definitely helped me to understand what it means to be a counselor. They are all really willing to answer questions. If they do not know the answers, they are willing to go out and research it until they can give you an answer.

P.1 I like how the professors have a love for what they are doing. It makes a difference.

At the other end of the continuum, participants described a perceived disconnect between the professors in terms of expectations as well as the content and use of examples employed in the classroom. This perception served to support the initial conceptualization of the two dimensions of the *influences* property and served to provide a thicker, more saturated description of this property. This quotation illustrates the perceived disconnect:

P.3 I think it is difficult because obviously the different professors bring in their own experiences. If one is more experienced in a certain kind of counseling that is all you really hear about in class. So if they’ve only worked as a school counselor, they provide examples that are relevant for school counselors but not really community counselors. It just gets frustrating.

*Peer influences.* The second property of the *influences* category was conceptualized as *peer influences.* *Peer influences* were depicted as participants’ perceptions regarding how their peers have had some influence on their experience during their first year in the counseling program.

P.7 We do a lot of group work in this program and in all of my classes I have at least one person in my group who is always on top of things, very task-oriented and wants things done three days in advance. I am one of those
people who do things the night before. I just can’t do that anymore. I have changed and worked with that because it is not just me. So my peers have been influential and have helped me to change academically. Every person that I have worked with in a group activity I have really liked and worked well with.

The additional data confirmed the dimensional continuum ranging from lackadaisical to supportive. While no new information was provided during the second round of interviews regarding the lackadaisical dimension of the peer influences property, participants’ comments during the member checking opportunity resonated with the lackadaisical attitudes and were redundant with the initial property conceptualization.

Specific comments were made regarding how participants perceived their classmates in a positive manner. Participants described influential experiences and interactions in which they felt their peers served as a community of support. This sense of cohesion helped to support and encourage the students throughout their first-year experience in the counseling program.

P.9 I didn’t really expect to meet anyone that I would consider to be a real friend or anyone that I could see myself hanging out with. However, every class I have had at least one person who I have gotten to know on a more personal level. That has been really nice and has helped me a lot throughout this first year.

P.2 You know we do a lot of groups with our classmates. I didn’t expect to learn so much about some of my classmates. I really liked that and it has made me feel really close to them and I think I have learned a lot from that…from those experiences in the lab.

*Self-affirmation influences.* The third property of the *influences* category was conceptualized as *self-affirmation influences.* Participants described how they internalized feedback and evaluations and described how that internalization had influenced their first-year experience in the counseling program. In other words, grades
and evaluations of their ability as emerging counselors, given by professors and peers, were taken personally among the participants and viewed as influential during the first year.

P.1 My expectations during this first year has been basically gauged by my grades because as you know that is what determines if you are doing it right or not.

The self-affirmation influences property ranged along a continuum from positive to negative responses. Participants’ responses from the second round of interviews provided additional support for these dimensions. On the positive end of the continuum, participants described experiencing positive feelings when they received positive reinforcement regarding their abilities or skills. Often times, this positive support came in the form of good grades.

P.9 I feel really good about myself. My primary expectations dealt with getting good grades. And because I have gotten good grades, I am really happy about myself.

The other end of the self-affirmation influences continuum contained negative responses. Negative feedback and low grades were internalized as very anxiety-provoking. The statements made by others served to affirm their fears regarding learning new techniques or their overall ability as emerging counselors.

P.1 I am quitting the program. My experience has been wonderful except for one professor who doesn’t think I can apply the techniques and theories. It has created so much anxiety for me. I let it create anxiety for me. And it is just not worth it.

Figure 7 illustrates the influences category including the properties and dimensions in relation to the contextual category constructivist sense-making process.
Figure 7. *Influences* conceptual category, properties, and dimensions.
Meaning-Making

The second category that emerged from the data analysis was conceptualized as meaning-making. Second round analysis confirmed this category and provided redundancy with the data. As participants reflected on their experiences, meaning was derived by thinking about their personal expectations of certain events. Thus, meaning-making was defined as the meaning participants attributed to their experiences as first-year students. The properties within the meaning-making category were conceptualized as professional involvement, motivation, sense of purpose, significance of a graduate degree, and time off before returning to graduate school. There was no new information presented for the meaning-making category including two of the properties, sense of purpose and significance of a graduate degree. However, the additional information assisted in the reconceptualization of some of the properties.

Professional involvement. The second round of data analysis expanded the definition of professional involvement. After the first round of data analysis, professional involvement was defined as the meaning associated with joining professional organizations such as the American Counseling Association or Chi Sigma Iota. Participants also described experiences during national and state conferences as important and meaningful to their overall development as counselors. Following the second round of data analysis, the definition of professional involvement expanded to include other service activities in which counselors engage, such as advocacy for the profession as well as advocacy for clients. The definition became more holistic to encompass the variety of
roles that counselors take on in addition to their primary roles and the meaning that is
derived from such activities.

Examples of *professional involvement* include:

P.8 There are so many areas that counselors are involved in…and in the
different counseling associations. I would have never known that about
counseling and how important a role that plays in our futures.

P.9 I definitely have a bigger awareness of what counselors do such as
advocating for the profession. I mean, I didn’t realize that there are a lot of
things that go on with the government and counseling. Like I mean I
would have never been exposed to that otherwise and so realizing that
there are certain bills right now in the Senate that will affect me as a
counselor in the future is huge. You just never realize all of the little
things. Now I have a packet of legislative acts that affect counselors and it
is really interesting. It also makes me feel more of a part of being a
counselor…being able to do something like that…kind of like how voting
makes you feel more American. To be able to advocate and know that that
is available is really important to me.

**Motivation.** A second property of the *meaning-making* category was
conceptualized as *motivation*. No new information was provided by participants
regarding the *motivation* property. Additional data supported the dimensional
characteristics of the *motivation* property which ranged from educational to emotional. At
the educational end of the dimension, participants described the meaning that was
attributed to learning new counseling techniques. Examples of the educational dimension
include:

P.2 The theories and techniques class was very important in my discovering
how to be a counselor…just learning the process of doing it, the basic…I
mean, just the basic skills of doing it and having the labs with the real…
well almost real, experience of counseling

P.5 Doing the practice counseling sessions was meaningful to me in figuring
out what a counselor does. I really liked those.
Additional data confirmed the emotional dimension of the motivation property as well. Participants described the meaning that was attributed to emotionally dedicating themselves to the counseling program. An example of the emotional dimension includes:

P.2 I really like this program. I like the one-on-one counseling. It seems that everything has fallen into place really nicely. It has been hard but very doable at the same time and it definitely reinforces my decision to be here. This is what I should be doing.

Second round data did not support the conceptualization of sense of purpose and significance of a graduate degree as stand-alone properties of the meaning-making category. Information gathered from the second round of data analysis as well as a repeated comparison clarified sense of purpose and significance of a graduate degree and uncovered that both properties were addressing many of the same elements. Further, after reexamining the first round of data analysis the determination was made to combine the two properties into a single property labeled significance of a counseling degree. In order to account for the combination of these two properties, the definition of the significance of a counseling degree property was expanded.

Significance of a counseling degree. Significance of a counseling degree was defined as the meaning participants attributed to obtaining a degree in counseling. Participants described the future with regards to attaining a Master’s degree and the benefits therein. Moreover, participants described feelings and perceptions regarding graduate work and the meaning attributed to being a graduate student.

As a result of the reconceptualization, the property significance of a counseling degree ranged along a continuum from personal to professional. Personal was described as the intrinsic rewards regarding obtaining a Master’s degree in a helping field.
Participants also described the meaning of being in graduate school and obtaining a Master’s degree in regards to their families and friends. Therefore, the personal dimension accounted for the participants’ internal feelings and perceptions regarding obtaining a Master’s degree in counseling. Examples of this dimension include:

P.6 I expected more of myself this past semester to prove to myself and some to my family, but more to myself that I can do it. So I am pretty happy with how things are going now.

P.7 I based this first year on how I did things in undergrad. And knowing that counseling was something that I was really interested in, I wanted to succeed as high as I possibly could. I definitely pushed myself harder than I have before because this is an important field and an important degree and I wanted to do well.

The other end of the continuum was conceptualized as professional. Participants described the extrinsic rewards for obtaining a Master’s degree in terms of future employment. Participants also provided references to professional differences in terms of their expectations pertaining to their performance doing graduate work. Therefore, the professional dimension accounted for the participants’ reactions and perceptions regarding the act of completing a Master’s degree and the inherent professional benefits.

P.9 I also think that the program has changed over time too and has become more structured and I feel more confident that I will complete the program and get a job.

P.7 The Master’s degree is something that you either really want or it is something you are not going to be able to do because you can’t have it half way. There is no medium; you don’t have time to mess up.

Time off before graduate school. Another property of the meaning-making category was labeled time off before graduate school. Time off before graduate school was defined as any amount of time taken off between undergraduate training and
graduate training. Participants’ initial descriptions depicted feelings and perceptions associated with being older than other graduate students as well as descriptions of technology changes over time. After the first round of interview data analysis, the property *time off before graduate school* did not contain specific dimensions. Rather, participants commented on their reactions to entering graduate school after taking some time off to pursue other avenues. Therefore, a second round question was designed to specifically explore and describe this property. The second round question was, “How did the time in which you decided to enter graduate school affect your experience during the first year?” By utilizing an exploratory question, participants were able to discuss whether their decision to enter graduate school directly from undergraduate school versus taking time off before returning to graduate school affected their experience during their first year in their counseling program.

After the second round of data analysis, the data did not support the original definition of the *time off before graduate school* property. Rather, the data supported a reconceptualization of this property that included an expanded definition. The new definition of the *time off before graduate school* property was defined as the feelings and perceptions of entering graduate school regardless of the amount of time between undergraduate and graduate training. Further, participants described assumptions that were made regarding other individuals who might have decided to enter graduate school at different times than themselves. Examples of the reconceptualized *time off before graduate school* property include:
When I made the decision to enter graduate school I knew I wanted to go into counseling and once that happened, my current job started to look less and less appealing.

The time in which I entered graduate school has affected me quite a bit. I had just finished another Master’s program so I was already prepared for graduate work. I already had certain expectations and because I had had a year off before my other Master’s program and time to work in the schools. I felt like those experiences made me ready for this program.

Well, my undergraduate is in psychology which I can definitely relate to this program. I think that has been really beneficial to come in right away because it was still fresh in my brain…and a lot of the things that I am learning I can relate with pretty quickly.

Time off before graduate school contained two very distinct dimensions, those who entered graduate school directly from their undergraduate training versus those who worked before returning to graduate school. Participants described the differences in their experiences as they related to the time they decided to enter graduate school. The participants also discussed assumptions about other students in the program and when they decided to enter graduate school. Examples of participants’ who took time off before returning to graduate school include:

I didn’t really know what I wanted to do after graduation with my Bachelor’s degree. I went back for education but then I realized that I didn’t want that. I think taking time off was really beneficial. I think I was much more focused and ready to go…much more mature. I mean I grew during that time and matured as a person to the point that now I can say that I have never missed a class. That is a big accomplishment for me because in undergrad if I didn’t feel like going to class I wouldn’t go. So, definitely maturity and growing as a person was really helpful and meaningful for me this first year.

I was scared to come back to school because I had been off for so long. But I was excited too because I was coming back as an adult. I had a new perspective on things and some life experience which I think was really helpful.
P.6 I think taking time off made me more well-rounded and open-minded to things because the daycare that I was working at was lower income...so a lot of my classes that I took this first year, I could place them with a past experience. I think if I would have gone right after undergrad, I wouldn’t have had the experience to relate to the classes. The learning meant more to me this year than it would have if I would have gone straight through.

P.2 Taking time off affected my seriousness with school. I wanted to do well and realized that I didn’t want to do what I had been doing forever. Um, and there are time that I get a little burned out but even then, I am taking this program pretty seriously.

P.8 I found it very difficult even though it was a short amount of time for me to come back to school and be regimented in school. I teach all day and then to come here and be the student...it is hard to get back into it. I would have preferred to just go straight through. I felt out of the loop. I think it probably gets harder the longer the time progresses...like some people who have taught for 15 years and then go back...I couldn’t imagine. It would be so hard because you are so long out of the institution of college.

The other end of the continuum included descriptions from participants who went directly from their undergraduate training to graduate school. Participants described the closeness to the material and their increased confidence regarding entering graduate school. Examples of participants who went from undergraduate training directly into the counseling graduate program include:

P.4 I think that if I took a break it would be really hard for me to come back and get right back into it. I know it was the smartest decision to keep going straight through. And, a lot of people tell me that once they quit, they never go back...or it is 10 years before they go back. I don’t want to be 30 years old and just starting my Master’s degree.

P.5 I think it was good to go straight through because I know a lot of adults who haven’t been in school in a long time and they haven’t been able to...you know...they haven’t written papers in a long time. So I think it was really beneficial that I had the experience to study and know how to write papers. A couple of my classes, even the adult students had questions about things that I had no questions on because I had just come from undergrad.
I may have to put things on the back burner but the fact that I came right into the program was really good for me. I am glad that I picked now to enter than much later because who knows what would have happened...like life. I am very involved too in what is going on in the program.

Figure 8 illustrates the category meaning-making including the properties and dimensions in relation to the contextual category constructivist sense-making process.  

Knowledge Conceptualization

The third category that emerged from the initial data analysis was labeled knowledge conceptualization. As participants described their experiences as first-year counseling graduate students, perceptions of the content they were learning, the method in which the content was taught, and the intensity of the material emerged as properties. Participants described assumptions of counseling, including both clinical and academic assumptions, which were based on previous experiences.

The second round of data analysis confirmed knowledge conceptualization as a category. Analysis of knowledge conceptualization revealed five properties which were labeled source of learning, instructor methods, information intensity, information assumptions, and information history. Additionally, these properties and the dimensions therein were confirmed by the second round of data analysis.

Source of learning. One of the properties in the knowledge conceptualization category was defined as source of learning. Participants described ways they preferred information to be presented to them during their first year in the counseling program. Specifically, source of learning was defined as participants’ expectations and
Figure 8. **Meaning-making** conceptual category, properties, and dimensions.
preferences regarding how class material is conveyed during the first year. Examples of source of learning include:

P.4 I have one professor who I really like how he runs class. He doesn’t just sit there and lecture. He asks you questions that help you learn what you are supposed to learn…and just the way he goes about it…he just doesn’t stand up there and lecture. I mean he’ll lecture if he needs to but he’ll say, ‘How does this work?’ He puts it on us to learn it.

P.7 I really liked the methods class. I learned a lot in that class. It is for the entire program so it includes every counseling student whether you are school, community, or higher ed. We are all in the same class. There was a lot of role-playing and we were actually in the counseling clinic role-playing, video taping, and critiquing it based off of what we were learning that week. I really learned a lot from that class. That was a very, very valuable class because not only were we being the counselor but we were also the client and got to critique our classmates.

After the initial data analysis, the source of learning property consisted of two dimensions ranging from orientation to detail to expectation of application. On one end of the dimension, participants described their desire to have more details and more concrete information presented to them during their first year. This dimension also represented an orientation towards a didactic learning environment. Examples of an orientation to detail include:

P.5 I still don’t really know what we are going to do next year. I feel like we learned a lot of theories but I don’t know how that is going to apply next year. I guess I’ll figure it out when I get to practicum but I wish they would let us know more about our actual job duties.

P.3 In my clinical pathology class, I feel like I haven’t really learned how to fully diagnose…well I’ve learned to diagnose but I haven’t really learned the whole spectrum and I think that is so important. I’d really like to know how to do that and I don’t feel like I’m going to get that information.

Participants also discussed their expectation of application and expressed their desire for experiential learning. Participants further described their expectations of
application in comments made about the need to connect the material they were learning to something within their personal reference. Several quotations aptly illustrate this point.

P.7 I think it is one of those things. You can read a million things but I am not one of those people who can just know what to do. I am very hands-on. The more I believe I am going to be out there and doing it I think I will start to understand a lot more about those things that I have read and learned about in class.

P.4 We had to do interviews and different little things in class but I was expecting a lot more going out and doing more outside work as a class requirement. We had to do something small for an intro class but everything else has been pretty much in class…normal papers, tests…but nothing that has expected us to do more.

P.2 Rather than intellectually talking about it I would rather do it. I find that I learn well by jumping in and doing it. So that has been a big influence for me.

P.3 I had an appraisal class and learned about one instrument that I had to do a project on. We never heard or saw anything that was an actual application of the instrument or what it would look like in the profession. I never learned what the actual experience of giving that instrument would be like. It just seems that we are getting textbook information and never application.

P.9 I like the parts of the program that are hands-on. I think that is very practical.

_Instructor methods._ A second property of the _knowledge conceptualization_ category was labeled _instructor methods_. _Instructor methods_ described the participants’ reactions to how information was conveyed from the professors. Participants also detailed the meaning associated with the methods the instructors used as well as the relationship between _instructor method_ and their conceptualization of what they were learning. The first round of data analysis resulted in little information regarding general descriptions of _instructor method_ which called for further exploratory research. However, to avoid
guiding the participants to any specific responses, the question derived to ascertain this information was designed to be open-ended. Further, this question was intended to examine programmatic effects and how the program affected the participants’ experiences during the first year. Therefore, the second round question was, “What have been the best aspects of your program and what do you believe needs improvement?” This unrestricted question allowed for the participants to clarify if the property instructor methods was appropriate within the knowledge conceptualization category as well as illuminated other areas in which the students expressed opinions.

As a result, the participants provided little information regarding an actual definition of instructor methods but continued to provide redundant information regarding what they liked or did not like about the methods the instructors utilized in class. The second round of data analysis provided support for the challenging dimension contained in the instructor method property. Participants described the meaning associated with being challenged during their first year in a counseling program. Examples of perceptions related to challenge include:

P. 2 I really like my one professor because you really have to work hard in her class and I appreciate that. You know, she makes the work worth doing. I mean, I feel like my grade in that class is what I deserve to get. I think she is fair and I think…well she seems to know what she’s talking about with the practical parts of counseling.

P. 4 I have only one class where it is straight lecture for two and a half hours…and that gets really boring and it is hard to focus. There is this one professor though that when you get an A in his class, you know you worked hard. You are proud of yourself for getting an A in his class.

The other dimension within the instructor methods property was conceptualized as too easy. Participants described specific incidents and activities that they believed
were not at the level in which graduate students need to work. Participants also described instances in which their classes were too easy. Comments regarding the instructor methods being too easy include:

P.2 Some of my classes have been really easy...too easy for graduate level work.

P.3 I would say the downfall has been all the classes that, that haven’t really required anything out of me and so I haven’t really learned anything... I don’t really see the point.

P.4 There are definitely professors who didn’t give us enough work but I’m not complaining. It is nice to have a couple of easier ones even though I may not be necessarily learning all that much.

**Information intensity.** A third property contained in the knowledge conceptualization category was labeled information intensity. Participants’ descriptions of information intensity regarded information concerning the amount of work as well as perceptions of professors’ attitudes regarding the intensity of their expectations. Participants also expressed their wish for, and satisfaction with, an adult learning environment. Furthermore, analysis from the second round of interviews revealed an additional element to the information intensity property which primarily concerned the participants’ roles as graduate students and the expectations placed upon them. Examples of information intensity include:

P.2 I just really enjoy school. This quarter has definitely been the hardest quarter...but at the same time it is my favorite because I don’t have any throw-away classes. I mean, even though I’m not sleeping and I’m staying up until two o’clock every night. I like the rigor of it. I’m working harder than ever, learning a lot, and I love it.

P.4 I still do what I have done before but now I just have to do it more often. Like instead of having one paper due in a class, we have four papers due. I haven’t had to change the way I study or what I do so far.
Following the second round of data analysis, the property *adult learning* was reconceptualized. Information gathered from the second round of data analysis as well as a repeated comparison clarified that the dimensions high intensity and adult learning uncovered many of the same elements. Further, after reexamining the first round of data analysis, the determination was made to combine the two dimensions into one dimension labeled high intensity.

Therefore, the *information intensity* property ranged along a continuum from perceptions of low intensity to perceptions of high intensity. Participants described low intensity as not feeling challenged during classes or from the program as a whole. This is similar to the dimension of too easy within the *instructor method*. However, the property *information intensity* deals specifically with the participants’ overall expectations regarding the difficulty of the program as opposed to single events or incidents that are described as being too easy. Examples of low intensity include:

**P.4**  I was expecting…a lot of people say that ‘oh, the Master’s is 10 times harder than undergrad.’ I was expecting to have to study a lot more and have to go out and do more in general which I really haven’t done.

**P.5**  I expected to be challenged and I just don’t think the program itself is very challenging. Honestly, I didn’t read a lot of the textbooks but I still was able to get A’s so apparently I didn’t even need to read.

**P.2**  It is very easy to get an A in your classes.

The other end of the *information intensity* continuum is defined as high intensity. Participants described the high intensity by commenting on the level of difficulty in some of the counseling classes and comparing their experiences to their undergraduate experiences. Participants also described their desire to engage in challenging scenarios
and be treated as adults within their graduate environment. Moreover, the participants described their adjustment to their roles as graduate students. Specifically, participants expressed a desire to have more information provided to them at the beginning of their graduate program to assist them in acclimating to their new environment. Examples of high intensity include:

P.6 Graduate school is much different than undergrad. Undergrad is more general, this is much more in-depth...in my case, more actual school counseling techniques. I mean even the definitions are harder to catch on to than it was in upper level undergraduate classes.

P.9 The professors are very easy to reach and approachable and personable. I feel comfortable going to talk to them. It is more of a professional thing; the professors don’t treat you as a kid. It is more of an adult relationship in the sense that I am able to talk to them. That also applies in class. They treat their students like adults and I really respect that.

P.4 A lot of the professors too, if you have a big project that you have to do research out of class will give you a day off if they are going to a conference instead of making us work with a substitute. That seems much more at the level of graduate school that they’ll give us the day off to work on our papers. It has been pretty helpful.

P.3 I think there is a difference between giving information and hand-holding. It would be nice if there was more communication about deadlines and certification requirements. We’re asked to go out and find an internship and the handbook gives you very few guidelines as to what you need from your site. In actuality there is a lot more too but I just think it would be helpful and would help people to know what they need to do to get through the program in a timely fashion.

P.6 The second semester was easier because you already have made connections and you know who you can go to talk to, but last semester it takes about a half semester to figure it all out. Especially when you go to your first class and you realized that you didn’t do the reading for the first week because you didn’t know to check. I wish they would tell you that ahead of time so you are not already behind in the first class.

P.9 I feel like it would have been nice to have someone to tell me what classes I needed to take. I am in a class this quarter that I should probably not be
taking until next year but I didn’t know any better. I am doing okay but it probably would have been much more beneficial to take it next year. I think the program needs a mentoring or orientation type of program…maybe take a day and come to campus and meet with a professor to find out what we need.

Second round data did not support the conceptualization of information assumptions and information history as stand-alone properties of the knowledge conceptualization category. Information gathered from the second round of data analysis as well as a repeated comparison clarified information assumptions and information history and uncovered that both properties were addressing many of the same elements. Further, after reexamining the first round of data analysis the determination was made to combine the two properties into a single property labeled information history. Therefore, in order to account for the combination of these two properties, the definition of the information history property was expanded.

Information history. Another property within the knowledge conceptualization category was reconceptualized as information history. Information history can be defined as participants’ awareness of what counseling involves, including both assumptions regarding the counseling profession as a whole, as well as the roles and responsibilities of counselors. Further, information history can be defined as the amount of previous counseling knowledge that participants had prior to entering their first year in the counseling program.

Following the second round of data analysis, participants’ responses separated into two distinct areas, those with previous knowledge and those without previous knowledge. While there was no new information describing the information history
property, additional data saturated the two dimensions. An example of a participants’ comment regarding no previous knowledge include:

P.8 It is very hard to be put into a class where some people are higher ed, some are community, and some are school because we can’t really relate to one another. I don’t know what a case manager is or what an intake form looks like. I don’t know anything about what they are talking about. I do not have any prior knowledge to hook onto and help me to really understand. So I think there should be something to give you a heads-up with some of the basics...maybe a special orientation class. Nobody wants to feel lost and in some of my classes I felt really lost.

On the other end of the continuum, participants commented on their previous knowledge and how that had helped them conceptualize the information they are learning in their first year. Examples of previous knowledge include:

P.5 My undergraduate is psychology. I think that definitely related to this program. I mean, obviously it’s a helping profession, and I think that was real beneficial here. A lot of things that we have learned, I can kind of relate fast to.

P.3 I have worked around counselors and I only know this from my job but counseling is not just helping, it is sometimes crisis intervention. It is not just learning skills and theory. My job has helped me to develop a perspective in my mind of what I think it means to be a counselor.

Figure 9 illustrates the knowledge conceptualization category including its properties and dimensions in relation to the contextual category constructivist sense-making process.

Competence Appraisal

The second round of interview data analysis confirmed the fourth category that emerged from the data which was conceptualized as competence appraisal.
Figure 9. *Knowledge conceptualization* conceptual category, properties, and dimensions.
The *competence appraisal* category consisted of three properties after the initial round of data analysis. Two of the properties were confirmed and supported by the second round of data analysis, *self-efficacy* and *time management*. Following the second round of data analysis, the last property *perfectionism* was reconceptualized as *personal expectations*.
Self-efficacy. The largest and most prevalent property of competence appraisal was conceptualized as self-efficacy. The second round of data analysis provided redundant information for this property resulting in saturation of the data. Self-efficacy included participants’ reactions and perceptions of their confidence regarding their competence as first-year counseling students. Additionally, participants provided reference to their feelings regarding their future practicum and internship experience and whether they felt adequately prepared. Therefore, self-efficacy was defined as the participants’ perceived levels of confidence regarding their competence as emerging counselors. An example of self-efficacy is:

P.6 Well, we all just signed up to do our practicum next year and we are going to be in the schools next fall. Wow, this first year has gone really fast. You just realize that ‘whoa, I am going to be working with real kids. Then near the end of the first year you really start to realize, ‘now I am going to be working with real people, not my classmates anymore.’ That is really nerve-wracking.

Self-efficacy ranged along a dimension from high self-efficacy to low self-efficacy. The second round of data analysis served to strengthen the conceptualization of the two dimensions. Participants’ descriptions of high self-efficacy included high levels of confidence regarding their futures as counselors. Further, participants discussed a sense of preparedness for their abilities for upcoming practicum and internship opportunities. Examples of high self-efficacy include:

P.9 As I moved through the program I look at it like, ‘I am going to get straight A’s and I can do this.’ I kind of expected more of myself as I went through and now I feel like really confident with myself and my abilities. I knew they were there but the program has brought them out.
I really feel like I am prepared to talk to kids now. I feel like I can approach a person and really help them. I guess I always knew that but now I know it even more.

I have created my own counseling program for a school to use someday. That is huge for me and I did it. It is so nice to have a product to take with you.

The other end of the self-efficacy dimension was conceptualized as low self-efficacy. This dimension was supported and confirmed by the second round of data analysis. Low self-efficacy can be described as participants’ perceptions regarding the quickness of the program and the anxious feelings regarding entering into practicum and internship. Participants who described low self-efficacy did not demonstrate confidence in their personal abilities as emerging counselors as well as their personal abilities as counseling students. Examples of low self-efficacy include:

I have one issue that I am just not cutting. I’m not cutting it. I have a really hard time transferring knowledge into practical application…so that makes me nervous.

Other first-year students need to know that you cannot get by like you did in undergrad. You cannot write your paper the night before; you need to do it like a month before so you can have plenty of proofreads before you turn it in. I’ve had a hard time and I’m not sure it will get much better.

Time management. The second round of data analysis confirmed time management to be a property of the competence appraisal category. Time management is defined as amount of time consumed by graduate school in addition to balancing time between school and other activities. A participant’s comment that aligns with the time management property is:

I finally understood it in the second semester. I knew I would have to do extra work. I would have to do it ahead of time. It was…more time management. And it wasn’t that I didn’t know the material before, I just
didn’t know how to manage all of the different tasks and take care of my house. So I have learned overall time management besides all of the counseling material this first year.

Time management varied along a continuum of feeling overwhelmed to seeing the workload as manageable or sometimes easy. Participants described balancing school work with other activities and having to prioritize activities to get things completed on time. Following the second round of data analysis, the two dimensions were supported and confirmed by participants’ responses. Examples of time management being overwhelming include:

P.8 It was hard to balance the two, school and work, but I think time wise I don’t think anything could be better. It is hard when you have to balance things, home life and school life. And a lot of people in graduate school have careers while others are just out of their undergard degree so I think that makes a difference too.

P.7 I expected myself to be stressed out and I was for a long time. I was stressed and felt anxiety about things with balancing everything…but you live through it and ultimately it makes you better.

The other end of the continuum was conceptualized as manageable. Participants’ responses during the second round of interviews were redundant with regards to the manageable dimension. Participants described how over time they had acclimated to the workload of graduate school. Further, some participants also described situations in which they felt they had too much extra time. Examples of this dimension include:

P.5 I completely expected this first year to be me at home working. I mean I took time off work for this semester so I would have time for school. But I found myself with a lot of time on my hands and watching a lot of television.

P.7 I have learned how to balance my time with work. I am working and going to school which is hard. Let me tell you that I have learned that I cannot
procrastinate anymore. I used to be a huge procrastinator but now I realize that I can’t do that anymore.

**Personal expectations.** Another property of the *competence appraisal* category was labeled *personal expectation*. Participants described their personal expectations to remember everything and do everything correctly. Participants also described the feelings associated with forgetting information or performing techniques inaccurately. After the first round of interview data analysis, the initial property was labeled *perfectionism* however it did not contain specific dimensions. Rather, participants commented on the high expectations that they set for themselves and how those expectations served to measure their levels of competence. Therefore, a second round question was designed to specifically explore and describe this property. The second round question was, “What did you expect of yourself as a first-year counseling student? Have you fulfilled your expectations?” By utilizing this exploratory question, participants were able to discuss their personal expectations to determine if *perfectionism* was an accurate description of their experience.

After the second round of data analysis, the data did not support the original conceptualization of the *perfectionism* property. Rather, the data supported a reconceptualization of this property that included a broader definition and description of the participants’ experiences. The new property was conceptualized as *personal expectation* which was defined as the ways in which the participants expected or desired to perform as first-year counseling students. Participants described their personal awareness of their expectations that they placed upon themselves and how those
expectations influenced their overall motivation and drive within the first year. Examples of personal expectations include:

P.2 I expected that I would work hard this first year and learn a lot about counseling and I feel like I have accomplished that.

P.3 I expected to do well in my classes and perform well academically.

The second round of analysis revealed that the personal expectations ranged along a continuum from ideals of perfectionism to more realistic attitudes. Participants described their high expectations for themselves and described the feelings that presented as a result of having high expectations. Examples of perfectionism include:

P.7 I expected myself to know more and know what to do and that was a bit challenging because it was just not...well, let’s just say that some things fall into place and some things don’t. I have a background in education, so with community counseling that involves diagnoses and filling out progress reports...that was really complicated for me. My high standards made it really difficult for me to understand and be able to retain it all which was difficult to realize because I expected to just know what to do.

P.8 I expected myself to do the best of my ability and to achieve good grades. I only had one B in my undergrad...I mean I work towards the best. I expected myself to do well which is good in my opinion.

The other end of the continuum included realistic personal expectations. Participants described their desire to do well but their overall concern was with learning and truly understanding the material. The following quotations aptly illustrate this dimension.

P.2 I’m not so concerned with getting straight A’s but I really want to learn. I mean, the grade is important to me...but I don’t care whether it is an A or a B. I’m much more interested in learning the material. My goal is to really get the information down.

P.3 I really expected myself to try and focus more on learning and less on achievement. I’ve tried to focus more on what I’m learning and less on
how well I’m doing. I mean… one can relate to the other. I’ve tried to keep up with my readings and to really research papers for the knowledge that I’ll take from it and be able to apply it in a job versus for an A on my report card.

Figure 10 illustrates the *competence appraisal* category including its properties and dimensions in relation to the contextual category *constructivist sense-making* process.

**Triangulation**

Triangulation procedures were also utilized during the second round of analysis to further enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the data. According to Maxwell (1996), triangulation “reduces the risk of chance associations and of systematic biases due to a specific method and allows a better assessment of the generality of the explanations that you develop” (p. 94). It is necessary to point out that the act of utilizing triangulation strategies does not automatically increase the validity of the research because the sources in which triangulation are used may hold similar biases which could result in a false sense of representation (Maxwell, 1996). Therefore, Fielding and Fielding (1986) suggested the researcher be aware of the shortcomings of any particular method and look for specific ways to deal with this threat. In order to counter this threat, the researcher utilized member checks. Member checks allowed the researcher to check the emergent categories, properties, and dimensions with the members.

**Member Checks**

Member checking was utilized during the second round of data analysis to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the data by soliciting feedback regarding
Figure 10. Competence appraisal conceptual categories, properties, and dimensions.
the emergent categories, properties, and dimensions, as well as the tentative theory from the participants. According to Maxwell (1996), member checking is the “single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpretation of the meaning of what they say and the perspective they have on what is going on” (p. 94). Member checks were conducted after the second round of interview questions. The researcher presented the emergent data analysis and the participants provided comments relating to whether categories resonated with their experiences as first-year students. Member checking also allowed for further clarification of some of the concepts and assisted in the reconceptualization of several of the properties.

In addition to member checks, multiple triangulation strategies were employed to decrease the chance for inaccurate representations. Maxwell (1996) suggested when triangulation procedures are well applied, the data is more thoroughly protected from researcher bias and invalid conclusions. Given the prospective for multiple triangulation bias, a variety of triangulation techniques were also utilized with this study including data triangulation, investigator triangulation and theory triangulation.

Data Triangulation

Data triangulation is the use of a variety of data sources in a study (Denzin, 1978). As with the initial round of data collection, the second round of interviews also employed data triangulation by involving participants from a variety of institutions located in Ohio. It is important to note that the same nine participants were interviewed in the second round of interviews. Interviewing students in different programs, as well as different
geographic locations, helped to make the data findings and category conceptualizations more credible.

*Investigator Triangulation*

A second triangulation technique used in the present study was investigator triangulation. Denzin (1978) described investigator triangulation as using several different researchers or investigators throughout the analysis of the interview data. As previously mentioned, this occurred by consulting with two faculty members with regards to the first round of data analysis. Consultation also occurred with the development of the second round of interview questions. Consulting with these faculty members produced a greater likelihood for an increase in objectivity and a decrease in researcher bias.

*Theory Triangulation*

In addition to utilizing data triangulation and investigator triangulation, theory triangulation was employed with the second round of interview data. Theory triangulation involved the use of multiple perspectives to interpret a single set of data (Denzin, 1978). Theory triangulation involved re-comparing interview data with two existing theories, Karl Weick’s sensemaking theory and constructivism. Comparing the data with existing theories served to check for consistencies and inconsistencies with the findings of the interview data. Several important concepts surfaced from the second round of interviews that paralleled existing theories.

Following the second round of data analysis, the consistencies were supported and thus strengthened the parallel between existing theories and the present categories, *influences, meaning-making, knowledge conceptualization,* and *competence appraisal.*
As the participants discussed their first year in the counseling program, numerous references were made pertaining to figuring out their first year. In other words, participants often times used previous experiences, whether from undergraduate training, work experience, or life perspective, to help construct and make sense of their new experience. Further, as participants experienced their first year, they emphasized influential people or events, the meaning attributed to those events, how those events were related to the conceptualization of knowledge and their personal appraisal of competence. Consequently, the parallels between existing theories and the four present categories strengthened the conceptualization of the contextual category constructivist sense-making process which was defined as the process used by participants to make sense of their first year in the counseling program.

Sensemaking and constructivist theory. As previously noted, many of the characteristics of Weick’s (1995) sensemaking theory and constructivism are consistent with the emergent categories from the first and second round of interviews. Given that the second round of interviews took place near the end of the participants’ first year in the graduate program, the idea of retrospective element and ongoing nature element of sense-making is especially relevant. As previously noted, retrospective sensemaking highlights the “lived” experience insomuch as “the past tense captures the reality that people can know what they are doing only after they have done it” (Weick, 1995, p. 24). The ongoing nature of making sense of experiences can be either of “pure duration, which has no boundaries or differentiations” or as “discrete segments” (p. 25).
Following the first round of interviews and data analysis, the participants were in the process of making sense of their experiences and attributing meaning to specific incidents and events. Therefore, the responses were more indicative of the pure duration of retrospective sensemaking. Participants’ responses during the second round of interviews and the subsequent analysis represented not only pure duration but also illustrated discrete segments in which participants used to construct the reality of their first year.

Second round interview data also continued to confirm a close connection with the social nature of sensemaking. Both Weick’s sensemaking theory (1995) and constructivist theory affirm that making sense of one’s experience is never accomplished in isolation. Further, constructivist theorists also support that social interactions help to support one’s understanding of a given phenomenon (Fosnot & Perry, 2005). Participants continually discussed the role their peers, professors, and supervisors had during the students’ first year. For example, the category **influences** encompassed the variety of ways in which the participants’ experiences were social including both professor **influences** and peer **influences**. Whether the participants described their influences to be positive or negative with their professors and peers, the features of the interactions were nonetheless social in nature.

Another parallel between the second round of interview data and the two theories, sensemaking and constructivism, is the characteristic of extracting cues from a familiar framework. Weick (1995) stated that, “extracted cues are simple, familiar structures that are seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring” (p. 50).
This idea of extracting cues is also consistent with constructivism in that individuals use previous points of reference to assist in making sense of future events (McAuliffe, 2002b).

The second round of analysis continued to support this notion most notably within the knowledge conceptualization category. Participants repeatedly discussed that having previous knowledge in certain areas assisted them in making sense and developing a deeper understanding of the material which they were learning. The reconceptualized property information history exemplified that participants incorporated and linked together previous knowledge with new information to attain a clearer picture of what they were learning.

In addition to parallels between the second round of interview data and the two existing theories, consistency between the contextual category and the theories existed as well. Fosnot and Perry (2005) stated, “Rather than viewing learning as a linear process, it is understood to be complex and fundamentally nonlinear in nature” (p. 11). As the participants experienced their first year, a variety of events, incidents, and/or individuals influenced the participants’ construction of meaning. This is consistent with the nonlinear nature of constructivism and evidences the parallels between the students’ experiences and constructivist theory. This nonlinear process provides support for the contextual category constructivist sense-making process. Constructivist sense-making process is defined as both an individual and social process whereby reflecting on the first year produced reactions regarding their sense of purpose and their motivating drive to be in a counseling graduate program. As the students progressed through their first year, they
were in the process of constructively making sense of their experience. This contention is supported by the interrelatedness of the existing categories, *influences, meaning-making, knowledge conceptualization*, and *competence appraisal* with the contextual category *constructivist sense making process*.

*Researcher Observation Notes*

Researcher observation notes were also utilized as a triangulation technique. The second round observation notes continued to support and confirm the conceptualization of the initial four categories. The researcher observed the participants’ affect becoming aroused as they described the *influences* category. A number of the participants discussed individuals who were influential while they progressed through their first year. The participants also commented on the variety of reasons why professors and peers were deemed to be influential to them during their first year. This is consistent with the process element and nonlinear nature of the contextual category *constructivist sense-making process* because the participants were using their influential experiences to construct their overall description of their experiences.

The researcher observed similar responses to issues associated with the *meaning-making* category. Participants exhibited a sense of fulfillment regarding whether the graduate degree was perceived either as a professional or personal accomplishment. In addition, participants also displayed a sense of confidence regarding the time in which they decided to enter graduate school. In other words, the participants’ responses regarding why they entered the counseling program when they did, evidenced that they
were already beginning to construct and make sense of their future experience based upon previous experiences.

The researcher also observed a large number of similar responses as the participants spoke about their *knowledge conceptualization*. Participants richly described how they preferred to learn and their desired class structure. Furthermore, the researcher observed the participants’ excitement, and sense of empowerment, when they felt that their teachers were treating them as adults and held high expectations for them. The participants were engaged not only in the material they were learning but also engaged as learners.

*Competence appraisal* received considerable support during the second round of data analysis. The researcher continued to make observations as the participants spoke about future experiences such as practicum and internship experiences. The property *self-efficacy* was specifically influential with regards to how the participants conceptualized their competence levels. Also, the property *personal expectations* was related to the contextual category in that individuals were not only utilizing previous experience to make sense of their present experience but also using their personal expectations to drive the process of sense-making during the first year.

*Researcher Memos*

In addition to the researcher notes, memos continued to be made during the process of the second round of interview analysis. Memos made during the analysis of the second round of data revealed that participants’ experiences were socially constructed and participants attributed meaning to the activities in which they were engaged during
the first year. Further, memos supported the conceptualization that participants were actively trying to make sense of the process experience and thus the contextual category *constructivist sense-making process*.

A variety of triangulation methods were employed during the analysis of the second round of interview data. The researcher implemented member checks, data triangulation, investigator triangulation, and theory triangulation. Further, researcher observation notes and memos were used to triangulate the contextual category as well as the existing categories, properties, and dimensions.

*Emergent Theoretical Framework*

Participants’ responses in the second round of interviews served to saturate the categories, properties, and dimensions. Participants’ descriptions were redundant during the second round of interviews. Data analysis findings indicated that the contextual category *constructivist sense-making process* in addition to the conceptual categories, *influences, meaning-making, knowledge conceptualization*, and *competence appraisal* were accurate descriptions of the participants’ experiences as first-year Master’s degree counseling students. These descriptions served to facilitate the development of a tentative theory regarding the first year experience for counseling students.

The contextual category *constructivist sense-making process* emerged as the contextual category in which all of the initial categories were conceptualized and organized. This overriding category provided the context of all of the experiences existing within the first year. It further illustrated that the process of making sense and
constructing an understanding of one’s experience during the first year is a nonlinear process in which a variety of factors are interrelated.

The conceptual categories are also interrelated with each other as well as with the contextual category. The conceptual categories influences, meaning-making, knowledge conceptualization, and competence appraisal in relation to the contextual category constructivist sense-making process illustrate that students during their first year begin to make sense of their experiences prior to entering the program through their personal expectations and previous experiences and continue constructing their experiences as they progress through their first year. Participants continually described the constructivist sense-making process as they described how they made sense of their influences and how they attributed meaning to their experiences (meaning-making). Additionally, constructivist sense-making process was the center of the knowledge conceptualization and competence appraisal as the participants described the ways in which knowledge was learned and incorporated into their repertoire as well as how they appraised their levels of competence as first-year counseling students.

Conclusion

Four major categories were conceptualized from the initial analysis and confirmed during the second round of data analysis. The categories that represented the participants’ experiences included influences, meaning-making, knowledge conceptualization, and competence appraisal. These categories described the various influences on the students during their first year, the personal meaning that was attributed to their experiences, the way in which the students conceptualized knowledge, and how the students appraised
their competence as emerging counselors. Axial coding revealed that relationships existed among the students’ experiences through their properties and dimensions. In addition, the contextual category conceptualized as constructivist sense-making process is the overall category through which the other categories are related. Figure 11 illustrates the relationship of the contextual category with the other existing categories.

Focus Group

A focus group was assembled to present the emergent categories, properties, and dimensions to first-year counseling students. Further, the contextual category was present to a group of first-year students in order to check whether the tentative theory resonated with them as an accurate representation of their experiences as first-year counseling students. The focus group was composed of six first-year students including two students who were original participants. The participants volunteered to discuss and reflect on their experiences as first-year students and provide feedback regarding the contextual category constructivist sense-making process as well as the conceptual categories influences, meaning-making, knowledge conceptualization, and competence appraisal. The students were asked the following questions in order to verify the categories and overall tentative theory.

1. “What are your perceptions regarding this tentative theory in terms of your experience as a first-year counseling student?”
2. “Do you feel that the theory resonates with your experience? If so, what element(s) of it resonates the most with you and what resonates the least with you?”
Figure 11. The contextual category, *constructivist sense-making process* in relation to the conceptual categories.
Chapter IV: Section III – Focus Group

Introduction

Following two rounds of individual interviews, a focus group was assembled to present the conceptual categories, properties, and dimensions, the contextual category, and the emergent tentative theory to first-year counseling students. The focus group was composed of six first-year students including two students who were original participants. All of the focus group members were from the same university. Given that the purpose of the focus group was primarily to conduct member checks, the specific university in which the participants attended, as well as whether the participants were from different universities, was not important in determining who should participate in the focus group. Additionally, a first-year doctoral student was present during the focus group to serve as an observer and note taker.

The participants volunteered to discuss and reflect on their experiences as first-year students and provide feedback regarding the contextual category constructivist sense-making process as well as the conceptual categories influences, meaning-making, knowledge conceptualization, and competence appraisal. The participants were presented with the categories, properties, and dimensions. Participants were also presented with a figure illustrating the interaction and relationship between the conceptual categories influences, meaning-making, knowledge conceptualization, and competence appraisal and the contextual category constructivist sense-making process. Subsequently, the students were asked the following questions in order to confirm the categories and overall tentative theory.
1. “What are your perceptions regarding this tentative theory in terms of your experience as a first-year counseling student?”

2. “Do you feel that the theory resonates with your experience? If so, what element(s) of it resonate the most with you and what resonates the least with you?”

**Focus Group Results**

Participants’ responses confirmed that the conceptualizations of the categories, properties, and dimensions derived from the first two rounds of interviews and data analysis, were consistent with their experiences as first-year counseling students. Focus group participants verified that the contextual category *constructivist sense-making process* and the four categories *influences, meaning-making, knowledge conceptualization*, and *competence appraisal* provide accurate descriptions of their experiences during their first year. Throughout this section of the chapter, the six focus group participants’ quotes are indicated FG.X, with X indicating each of the six participants by number.

Participants’ responses also confirmed the tentative theory that students progress through a process in which they make sense and construct an understanding of their experience. Responses also confirmed the interrelatedness of the categories and the nonlinear nature of their sense making during the first year. Examples from the focus group that illustrated the participants’ confirmations as well as support for the contextual category *constructivist sense-making process* include:
FG 4 I can see how I used my previous experiences...how my previous experiences influenced how I made sense of this year. I hadn’t really thought about it that way before but it makes sense. It is really interesting.

FG 1 If I wouldn’t have taken time off it would have changed my entire perspective on what I was learning and how I experienced this year. Your theory makes my experience make sense more and showed me how taking that time off influenced how I made sense of this year. It is really interesting. I wouldn’t change anything.

FG 5 I think it is definitely a process and not a linear one. Like I said, all of these categories are related and all apply to my experience.

FG 3 All of the categories are really interrelated and I can see how all of them correlate with my experience. The whole picture is really cool.

FG 6 All of the categories and their elements are important and relate to my experience.

Focus group participants confirmed the *influences* category including the three properties *professor influences, peer influences, and self-affirmation influences.*

Participants’ responses also illustrated the interconnectedness of the theory.

FG 1 I think the influences and meaning making categories resonate the most with me. I think that is really what the whole program...well especially this first year, has been the most important for me.

FG 6 I do think there is a disconnect between some of the professors. Their relationship among each other definitely influences how students interact with them and the program. The influences category definitely makes sense with me.

FG 1 I think my mentor has been great. They paired me up with someone who had a lot of similarities with me. I can call her and email her at any time and that really helped me a lot. It makes me want to do the mentoring program.

Participants also supported the conceptual category *meaning-making*. Moreover, a large number of focus group participants revealed that this category resonated the most with their overall experience. Finally, participants confirmed the properties *professional*
involve ment, moti vation, time off before graduate school, and signifi cance of a
counseling degree. Examples include:

FG 4 I went to the [American Counseling Association] legislative institute and it was neat because I saw between 50 to 60 professionals that were there and only a handful of students. It is interesting to see people who have been in the field for so long and still are enthusiastic and motivated and excited about our profession. That was just the neatest thing. It was unbelievably empowering to see them still so enthusiastic about their profession.

FG 1 I can relate to pretty much everything in this category. I have always had the “counselor t-shirt” on and had people come and talk to me. I was really excited to learn how to actually do it. It is one thing to listen to your friends and it is another thing to learn the skills and learn what to do. Learning some of the techniques has been really exciting to learn.

FG 3 I am so happy with where I am, and it doesn’t have much to do with getting the actual degree. Especially because I took time off and after undergrad I took a year off and then entered into a psych grad program but realized that that wasn’t for me. So I took a little more time and so I feel like I have spent so much time figuring out what I want to do and when I got here I was really excited but I still needed some affirmation. And then when my supervisor told me that I was doing a good job and applying the concepts to the actual counseling skills really helped me. It made me even more sure about myself and affirmed that this is where I should be. And I definitely wore the “counselor shirt.”

FG 4 I think that is a really interesting point of view to compare those who took time off and those who didn’t. That really makes sense that those who decided not to take time off look at the meaning more educationally as opposed to those who did take time off created more of a meaning or emotional meaning to it. That is really interesting.

FG 6 I hadn’t planned to take time off but I know that I wasn’t ready to go to grad school right after undergrad. And once I realized that my bachelor’s degree wasn’t going to really help me find a job, I decided to get a master’s to make myself more marketable. But once I got into the program and here, it is a lot more of ‘this is where I should be.’ This is what I want to be doing and it is not so much about being marketable anymore. That is interesting, I had never thought about that before.

FG 1 I got my bachelor’s in 1996 so it has been nine years. If I wouldn’t have had that time, I would not be here. I never intended to go to grad school
for a counseling degree but after that time, things that happened in my life guided me. That time was vital for me. It wouldn’t have happened otherwise.

FG 4 I was thinking about an individual’s original intent for coming into the program and how that might change once they actually get there. I would definitely agree that I didn’t take time off because of what you described. However, once I got here, my perspective totally changed because I knew I needed to be here. My motivation for being here completely changed once I actually started learning the information.

FG 2 It is really a transition to move from undergrad to grad school and the responsibilities inherent in that transition. However, almost everyone in my family has a professional degree but it is still very meaningful for me, especially to be involved.

FG 5 I think the meaning making category is the most relevant to my experience. The challenge part of it all too is more on a personal level than a academic level…but definitely the meaning making part probably because that is the actual program. My finance is also in grad school and he doesn’t come home and talk about how what he is learning is meaningful for him and his development. It is really different for counseling students.

Participants also provided support with the conceptual category knowledge conceptualization as well as confirmed the properties source of learning, instructor methods, information history, and information intensity. Examples of these confirmations include:

FG 3 I don’t know how I could have gotten through this first year and learned like I did without the taping. And it is funny because at first, I really hated the taping. But now I am like, wow that is the most valuable experience that I have had this year. Actually doing things and applying them helped me to conceptualize what I was learning.

FG 6 I agree, I totally think the application part of it was unbelievably helpful. There are definitely some theories though that I still don’t get and an example would have been nice. But overall, I like hearing about it but then trying it was the best way for me to learn it. Because if someone models it for you, you might just always try to follow that exact model and never be able to personalize it.
FG 4 I thought, well I guess I like the detail. I really liked the Gloria tapes where we got to see someone in the profession who really knows the theory and actually doing it. Learning it in class or even trying to do it seems so abstract. Powerpoints with the steps don’t really work for me. Or like seeing Perls doing Gestalt. In class I was so disconnected from Gestalt from the powerpoint because it was too vague. But actually seeing it on the tape made it more real for me. And it really showed me that some of the theories really work.

FG 2 I was thinking about that too because after watching the tapes I really hated how Perls interacted with the client but once I got to try it, I could do it my way and how to apply it on a more personal level. I think watching the tape was good but also maybe not watching it because then it isn’t hard to try and personalize it.

FG 2 It took me awhile to not want to rely on the tapes and want to do it on my own.

Finally, participants also confirmed the conceptual category competence appraisal including the properties self-efficacy, time management, and personal expectations. Participants’ quotes illustrate competence appraisal.

FG 3 That category is really interesting, especially the self-efficacy part. I think that is a really important aspect of how I rate my own competence.

FG 5 Time management is definitely a big part of how I felt I was doing in the program. I didn’t like it when I was too busy but I always managed to get through and do well.

FG 2 Competency is important. It is related to your levels of self-efficacy and confidence levels so that section makes a lot of sense to me too.

Overall participants in the focus group provided confirmation and further redundancy with the data. The participants’ responses saturated the contextual category constructivist sense-making process and the conceptual categories influences, meaning-making, knowledge conceptualization, and competence appraisal. Furthermore, the
participants endorsed the tentative theory that was presented to them during the focus group.
Chapter V: A Tentative Grounded Theory of the Experiences of First-year Master’s Degree Counseling Students

Introduction

This qualitative study sought to explore the experiences of first-year Master’s degree counseling students. Nine first-year students participated in two rounds of face-to-face individual interviews and six students participated in a focus group. Students’ comments served as a basis for the development of a tentative theory that describes the first-year experiences of counseling students. The tentative theory suggests that first-year students construct an understanding and make sense of their experience based on previous experiences as well as personal expectations. Various factors during the first year effect how students make sense of their experience. Consequently, a more comprehensive explanation of the tentative theory is provided in this chapter. It is important to reiterate that to the author’s knowledge, no research has been conducted specifically with counseling students to fully understand what is happening during the first year. Given the limitations stated in this chapter, the proposed theory is stated as a tentative one that will require future research for further refinement. Figure 12 illustrates the tentative theory and the relationships between the major themes and the contextual category.

A Tentative Grounded Theory of Master’s Degree Students’ Experiences during the First Year in a Counseling Graduate Program

Four major themes emerged from participants’ responses that shed light on the
Figure 12. Tentative grounded theory: *Constructivist sense-making process* and the interrelatedness between the conceptual categories.
various factors that affected students’ understanding and ability to make sense of their first year as counseling students. The four main themes were labeled *influences*, *meaning-making*, *knowledge conceptualization*, and *competence appraisal*. As students reflected and discussed their experiences, it was evident that they had progressed and continued to move through a process whereby the four identified factors were integrated into an existing frame of reference. Moreover, as the students continually experienced their first year, the four overriding themes were used to compare present experiences with past experiences, evaluate experiences based on personal expectations, and attempt to establish an overall understanding of their experiences (*constructivist sense-making process*). The continuation of making sense of one’s experiences was ongoing and continued to be revised and refined throughout the first year.

In understanding the *constructivist sense-making process*, it is important to reiterate the *process* element of the theory and keep in mind that the method of making sense is dynamic. Overtime, students continue to use experiences and conceptualize information based on what they are learning. That information is then integrated into their frame of reference and used to assist in an understanding of the details of their experiences. Furthermore, the *constructivist sense-making process* is both an individual and social process of constructing and making sense of one’s experiences. An important distinction between *constructivist sense-making process* and constructivist theory is that not only do social contexts influence personal interpretations of experiences, but the process of making sense is driven by plausible perceptions of an individual’s given reality as opposed to whether the individual’s actual construction is accurate. In other
words, it is less important to construct a perfectly accurate representation of previous experiences. Rather, one’s construction of previous experiences is more largely based on one’s personal perceptions of an event and how that event fits into one’s overall understanding of a given event.

*Influences.* One of the major themes that emerged from the data was labeled *influences.* As students progress through the first year and are subjected to a variety of influences present in a counseling program, the personal framework that is used to make sense of their experiences integrates the new stimuli into their personal repertoire. Specifically, this includes feeling *empowered* by professors and *supported* by peers as they progress through the first year. As students encounter positive experiences from professors and peers, they are likely to rate those experiences as influential which ultimately affects their overall understanding of their first year. This in turn assists in constructing and making sense of their experience.

Conversely, the process of making sense of their experience is also influenced by perceptions of *disconnect* between professors as well as a perceived notion of the *lackadaisical* nature of some classmates. As students face negative experiences from professors and peers, expressions of aggravation and frustration dominate. Consequently, these negative experiences resonate with students and are influential in the process of understanding. Therefore, the influences of both professors and peers integrate into students’ understanding of the first year and are not only used in the construction, but also in the process of making sense of one’s experience.
In addition to professor influences and peer influences, students also strive to make sense of their experiences by internalizing feedback and evaluations given by others. These self-affirmation influences are influential for students because others’ evaluations are used as a way to indicate an understanding of the material. Thus, external evaluations, whether positive or negative, affected students’ opinions of their abilities and are influential in how they make sense of their experiences.

As first-year students in a counseling program are presented with a variety of influences, they engage in a constructivist sense-making process in which previous experiences are reflected on and used to construct an overall understanding. Additionally, personal expectations regarding influential people and/or incidents are sorted through in order to make sense of the details of the various influences.

Meaning-making. A second overriding theme was conceptualized as meaning-making. As students reflect on the meaning associated with learning new material as well as gain awareness into the multiple facets of the counseling profession, they obtain a more holistic understanding of their experience. Specifically, students made reference to beliefs that attributing meaning to graduate experiences was most likely unique to a counseling graduate program as opposed to other graduate programs in unrelated fields.

The meaning-making theme was complex and included numerous properties. As students discussed meaningful activities, the meaning of being involved in other counseling related activities including professional organizations and advocacy became apparent. Gaining awareness into other counseling activities lent itself to feelings of excitement. The attribution of meaning pertaining to professional involvement and the big
picture illustrate that students actively seek to make sense and incorporate newly gained awareness into a constructed reality of the first-year experience.

A second variable pertaining to meaning-making was the actual motivating drive that brought students into a counseling program. As previously mentioned, motivation was described as the experiences, both early in the program as well as throughout the first year, that were recognized as meaningful. Students’ discussions regarding educational and emotional motivators that either brought them to the counseling program or helped them to continue in the program, were often times compared to previous experiences that were meaningful to them. Therefore, first-year students’ reflections on previous meaningful events are influential to the students’ processing and sense-making of their experience.

Similarly, the meaning of attaining a graduate degree in counseling is based not only on previous ideas of what it means to obtain a graduate degree but also includes students’ perceptions of the future with regards to attaining a Master’s degree. In other words, students make sense of the significance of a counseling degree by reflecting on personal expectations of obtaining the degree and use that to construct future possibilities. As students begin to understand and digest the significance of obtaining a graduate degree, including both professional and personal reasons, the constructed reality also begins to expand to include future experiences or potential prospects.

In addition to making sense of the significance of a counseling degree, students associate meaning with personal choices regarding the time in which they enter a counseling program. Choices are made based on previous experiences and personal
expectations of what the counseling program might entail. Consequently, there are a variety of reasons why individuals do not enter graduate school directly from undergraduate training. Some students graduate with a bachelor’s degree and never intend on returning for graduate school or graduate in an unrelated field. On the other hand, some students believe it to be most beneficial to go to graduate school directly after graduation with a bachelor’s degree. Regardless of whether individuals do or do not take time off, decisions pertaining to when one enters graduate school are influenced by life experiences as well as personal expectations. Additionally, different meaning is ascribed to the first-year experience depending on whether students have taken time off between programs or went straight from the undergraduate to graduate program.

It is apparent that students attribute meaning to experiences, thus increasing the likelihood that students are concurrently making sense of their experiences. Furthermore, as students reflect on meaningful events and compare them to not only previous experiences, but also personal assumptions or expectations, students develop insights into their overall experience. The comparison of prior experiences and expectations illustrates that students are engaging in the constructivist sense-making process.

Knowledge conceptualization. Understanding how students conceptualize information that is learned throughout the first year was another element to the overall understanding of their experience. The conceptual category, knowledge conceptualization is probably the most evident illustration of constructing and making sense of experiences based on previous experiences and personal expectations. Students mention a variety of methods in which they made sense of the information that was being
taught to them in classes. Specifically, students made reference to how beneficial previous experiences were in understanding and conceptualizing counseling material.

Students provided insight into preferred ways that information can be presented during their first year in the counseling program. Examples include didactic presentations with a number of details as well as experiential activities with applied components. Whether information is presented didactically or experientially, students actively strive to make sense of what they are learning and attempt to incorporate the new information into their existing repertoire of knowledge and skills. When students experience a preferred source of learning, the constructed understanding of their experience is likely to be more meaningful.

Similarly, students express a desire to have professors employ specific instructional methods. Students associate meaning with the methods the instructors use as well as the relationship between instructor method and the conceptualization of the learning process. Students reveal that the higher the professors’ expectations are, the harder the students want to work, resulting in a feeling of accomplishment as students are able to successfully complete the assignment or course. In other words, as students are making sense of what they are learning, the method the instructor utilizes is paramount to the students’ ability to conceptualize the newly learned material. Thus, students who make a meaningful connection to the material via the instructor method are more likely to be able to conceptualize it, reflect on it, make sense of it, and truly understand it.

Parallel to students’ desire for higher professor expectations, students possess a similar desire with regards to the intensity of the information. First-year students wish
for, and receive great satisfaction with, an adult learning environment that requires them to take a more active role in their own learning. Students prefer a high level of intensity and challenge in the classroom. Further, students associate higher levels of intensity to be connected with a larger sense of accomplishment. Thus, when the intensity of the information matches students’ personal expectations, there is a higher likelihood for students to want to make sense of the information and integrate it into an understanding of the experience.

A final variable affecting students’ knowledge conceptualization is the amount of prior history one has with the specific information. Information history was defined as participants’ awareness of what counseling involves including both assumptions regarding the counseling profession as a whole as well as the roles and responsibilities of counselors. Further, information history includes the amount of previous counseling knowledge that participants have prior to entering their first year in the counseling program. When students attempt to make sense of the first-year experience, previous knowledge plays an integral part in their overall conceptualization of the concepts. Previous exposure to not only similar theories and counseling techniques but also direct experience with counselors provides students with a framework with which new information can be incorporated. Students filter previous experience and an understanding of counseling concepts in order to make sense of the experience.

Competence appraisal. Making sense of one’s experiences based on how knowledge is conceptualized is related to how students rate their perceived levels of effectiveness as burgeoning counselors. The competence appraisal theme consists of
various ways students measure their capabilities throughout the first-year. Students’
descriptions of their competencies are largely based on personal expectations and
assumptions.

*Self-efficacy* is an element in how students determine competence. Students’
assumptions and expectations in regards to future practicum and internship experiences
affect how one measures whether one feels adequately prepared. When students
experience high levels of self-efficacy, they trust their abilities and competence as
emerging counselors-in-training and look forward to being ‘tested’ in their field based
experiences. Conversely, low levels of self-efficacy affect students’ confidence regarding
the future. Regardless of whether students exhibit high or low levels of self-efficacy,
students use assumptions regarding what they ought to know as a way to measure their
personal competence.

Students also appraise competence by examining the ability to manage time. *Time
management* is defined as the amount of time consumed by graduate school and the
balance of time between school and other activities. Whether students deem the time
consumed by graduate school as manageable or overwhelming, descriptions are based on
past academic situations as well as assumptions regarding the amount of time they
expected graduate school work would take.

Finally, students discuss personal expectations with regards to personal abilities
as first-year students. Not only do students construct a reality and overall understanding
based on previous experiences, this category specifically highlights the personal
expectations component in making sense of experiences. Students’ personal expectations
influence how they performed during their first year as well as played a large part in the overall ability to make sense of the experience.

Through the *constructivist sense-making process*, students assess present experiences through the lens of their present constructed reality. As they progress throughout the first year and experience the numerous happenings contained within the first year, students’ reality continues to be refined. The process of sense-making and constructivism is non-linear, complex, and multi-dimensional. Students use a variety of *influences*, experiences deemed as meaningful (*meaning-making*), conceptualize knowledge (*knowledge conceptualization*), and consideration of competence (*competence appraisal*) to make sense of their overall experience and to construct a newly refined reality. In examining the overall *constructivist sense-making process*, it becomes apparent that a variety of factors simultaneously are interacting as students sort out and make sense of their experience.

**Implications**

This study exploring experiences of first-year Master’s degree counseling students provides numerous implications for not only counselor educators but also counseling students. Refined pedagogical strategies and insight into counselor development are areas where this research could be very beneficial. The tentative theory presented in this paper can also facilitate insights into graduate student-counselor development.

*Counselor education.* The tentative theory provides a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing student-counselor development
within the first year in a counseling program. For example, students express the significance of counselor educators’ enthusiasm and willingness to provide a supportive and empowering environment for learning. Therefore, it would be beneficial for counselor educators to share real life examples or experiences with first-year students, which they found to be influential as experienced counselors. These types of examples provide first-year students with a context in which new material can be integrated. Moreover, with the understanding of the constructivist sense-making process, counselor educators can understand how their students are using the newly learned material and making sense of it and comparing it with previous assumptions and/or experiences.

Furthermore, given that the counseling profession is predominately women and all of the participants in the present study were female, this research provides further awareness into female students’ development. Gilligan and Attanucci (1988) stated that females are more concerned with interpersonal responsibility and compassion. Participants in this study stressed the importance of peer and professor influences, as well as the importance of meaning-making as they made sense of their experience.

At the same time, gender does play a part in how students communicate and may also influence how they interact with male professors or peers. For example, in the context of supervision, female supervisees were asked significantly less questions than male supervisees (Granello, Beamish, & Davis, 1997). Further, Comstock, Duffey, and St. George (2003) stated that there is currently little research on student development that addresses gender issues in counselor preparation programs and that more research is
needed. This theory provides a look of female first-year students which can serve as a base for future research regarding gender.

Insight into the process of constructing and making sense of one’s experiences provides counselor educators with a more meaningful understanding of students within counselor education programs. von Glasersfeld (2005) suggested that a constructivist attitude might reveal “the realization that students perceive their environment in ways that may be very different from those intended by the educators” (p. 7). Skovholt and McCarthy (1988) emphasized that beginning students’ ‘readiness’ to learn influenced whether an event would be deemed critical in their overall development. This theory provides counselor educators with awareness of students’ ‘readiness’ to learn and how that ‘readiness’ can be influenced by various pedagogical techniques. With this theory, counselor educators can understand the process students employ to make sense and construct their understanding of various experiences within the first year. Additionally, this information can assist counselor educators in gaining awareness into the need to process students’ previous experiences and expectations and discuss how their assumptions may or may not fit with their current experiences.

This tentative grounded theory of students’ experiences not only serves as a catalyst to examine students within their first year, but provides counselor educators information that can be used to revise and tailor curriculum and learning experiences to better suit the developmental needs of first-year counseling students. “A deeper understanding of the identity development of master’s level counselor education students can help counselor educators provide education and supervision that are more sensitive to
students’ developmental experiences” (Auxier, Hughes, & Kline, 2003, p. 26). Further, this theory provides counselor educators with understanding of counselors-in-training on both an interpersonal and intrapersonal level, which in turn can assist counselor educators in designing appropriate educational experiences (Furr & Carroll, 2003).

As students discussed their experiences, they consistently stressed the importance of deriving meaning from learning activities. Deriving meaning was achieved not only by students actively participating in class or experiential activities where skills were practiced, but meaning was also attributed to the level of intensity that instructors and professors required in their classes. When students were challenged to “think outside the box” or study and apply concepts, students expressed feelings of accomplishment and contentment. Conversely, students complained when they perceived activities as meaningless or professors as being too easy. Therefore, this research serves as a call to counselor educators to modify and refine pedagogical practices to include a variety of application pieces.

This theory also stresses the importance of increased performance expectations on the part of counselor educators. Students expressed that learning encompasses much more than a didactic classroom environment and desired a setting in which students work together, were challenged, and were held to high expectations. Students specifically expressed their dislike of open book tests and assignments that needed little rigor because they associated less meaning with easy assignments. Also, students stated that the more creative, dynamic, and applicable counselor educators were in how they presented materials strongly influenced their overall judgment of the importance of the material.
Counseling students. The findings from this research and the tentative theory also provide benefits for counseling students. This theory presents counseling students with a language and vocabulary that can be used to help express and put words to their experiences. This information could be presented to students within the first few weeks of the year to provide them with an awareness of the various factors associated with being a counseling student. Given that students will continue to use previous experiences as well as their own personal expectations to construct their understanding of their experiences, awareness of this theory would provide a context for the students to make sense of their first year. In other words, as a result of this study, first-year counseling students are able to see that their experiences are similar to others in their first year.

This theory also provides other benefits to counseling students. It serves as a reminder that students learn and make sense of their experiences in social contexts as opposed to isolation. The constructivist sense-making process allows students to understand that the process of making sense is not necessarily linear nor does it have to be perfectly accurate. Rather, it provides useful information to students regarding the multiple complexities inherent in a counseling graduate program which may serve to alleviate some of their stress. A different perspective may allow students to be more successful as they enter and progress through the counseling graduate program.

Gaining awareness of one’s own development is also important for first-year counseling students. Understanding the self as a learner, as well as a counselor-in-training can influence one’s ability to reflect on an experience (Hoshmand, 2004). This research
provided students with an opportunity to begin to make the reflection process more intentional.

Counselor development research. Counselor educators and researchers alike have agreed that understanding the concept of development, including the factors that influence one’s own development as a counselor-in-training, is both important and necessary for healthy counselor development (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Morrissette, 1996). This theory provides both counselor educators and counseling students with insight into factors influencing development, such as awareness into how students measure their competence or how specific instructor methods influence a students’ overall understanding of the material. Furthermore, understanding contributing factors to professional growth and development is not only appealing to counselors but often facilitative to professional and personal growth (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). In other words, gaining awareness into first-year counseling students’ constructivist sense making process allows researchers a new perspective to evaluate and understand counselor development.

While current literature has provided an abundance of information related to factors influencing students and counselors-in-training, such as themes and critical incidents in counselor development, student learning, counselor reflection, cognitive development and cognitive complexity, and counselor education pedagogy, there was a paucity of research that specifically examined first-year experiences of counseling students. Therefore, regardless of the specific implications that can be derived from this
research, an overriding implication is the start of new discussion among counselor educators.

In addition, to the author’s knowledge, constructivism has never been directly applied to counseling students. Therefore, a new line of research can provide the counseling profession with a different perspective on how student-counselors develop. Specifically, future researchers can explore if first-year students continue to construct their reality in the same way after they are exposed to field experiences.

Limitations

This tentative theory described the experiences of first-year Master’s degree counseling students. This theory also provided a rich description of the processes in which students progress as they make sense of their experience. Grounded theory methodology was utilized to explore and recognize themes in the data and to clarify concepts that described first-year students’ experiences during their first year. It is important to reiterate that to the author’s knowledge, no research had specifically examined the experiences of first-year counseling students through a qualitative lens. Consequently, limitations were inherent in the study and were taken into consideration and addressed.

The manner in which participants were recruited was a limitation. As described in the methodology of this study, participants were going to be recruited based on recommendations from department chairs. Department chairs were to provide the researcher a list of students who they believed would be able and willing to reflect on, and discuss their experience in a well articulated manner. However, once the actual
recruiting began, several department chairs expressed concern with identifying students without their permission. Therefore, instead, the department chairs were presented the opportunity to participate in the study and provided the professors with contact information. That information was sent to the researcher, at which time the researcher contacted the participants to set up an initial interview. This type of recruiting relied on volunteers which could have skewed the data because the participants were not chosen as set forth in the study proposal. By obtaining volunteers, the ability to gather information from first-year counseling students who would be willing and able to reflect and discuss their experience in a clear, articulate manner may have been jeopardized.

Similarly, because the students were volunteers, the ability to achieve intended maximum variation was comprised. While there was some diversity between the participants in terms of race, the participants were essentially a homogeneous group composed of very similar individuals. Further, all of the participants who were interviewed were female.

A third limitation was the difference in the size of the focus group than was originally proposed. In the methodology of this study, the focus group was not organized with the originally intended audience including three participants and several non-participants. Rather, the focus group was composed of two participants with whom I had conducted individual interviews, as well as four other first-year students who did not participate in any other element in the research. This was a result of the late second round interviews and the fact that two of the three universities had finished for the year.
Patton (2002) states that focus groups “typically involve bringing together people of similar backgrounds and experiences to participate in a group interview about major issues that affect them” (p. 236). Therefore, even though the focus group was not made up of the originally intended audience, it was made up of first-year students. Further, outside perspectives provided the opportunity to conduct member checks with the tentative theory thus providing increased credibility.

Another issue that is important to note includes one of the sites in which interviews took place. One of the institutions only housed a Master’s level counseling program while the other two offered both Master’s and Doctoral level counseling programs. During the data collection phases, no participant ever mentioned anything about doctoral students, including whether the program had a doctoral program or any influences doctoral students had on the participants’ first-year experience in the counseling program. Further, there was no mention of doctoral students serving as supervisors or instructors. Therefore, while no limitation is stated regarding this issue, it is important to note that the three programs where participants were interviewed were not identical in terms of their makeup.

**Future Research**

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe experiences of first-year Master’s degree counseling students. Concepts emerged in this study describing influences, meaning-making, knowledge conceptualization, and competence appraisal for first-year students. These emergent categories illustrated how students make sense and construct an understanding of their experience. Future research that examines first-year
counseling students should bear in mind concepts uncovered by this research. Furthermore, initial categories, as well as the tentative theory, can be used as the basis for future research.

Future researchers should solicit participants from more diverse backgrounds to provide a more complete understanding of first-year counseling students. Future research could also begin interviewing students earlier in the program, such as prior to entering and within the first several weeks of the quarter or semester. This would entail an opportunity to investigate students’ experiences more longitudinally. Further, students’ experiences from both CACREP accredited and non-CACREP accredited institutions could be investigated. Systematic research regarding students’ input into pedagogical practices would allow counselor educators to be able to design activities that would stimulate student learning. Students who were active participants in not only their learning but the construction of the learning activities would most likely thrive in the autonomy of their learning environment. Lastly, an exploration of faculty expertise and experience, both clinically and academically, might provide a more comprehensive picture of students’ experiences.

In summary, any of the categories, properties, and dimensions derived from this study could be further explored to gain a better understanding of student development. The investigation of influences, meaning-making, knowledge conceptualization, and competence appraisal would inform counselor educators of factors affecting students within their counselor education programs, specifically first-year students.
Conclusion

This qualitative investigation examined first-year counseling students’ experiences during their first year in a graduate counseling program. Actual students’ experiences rather than the current practice of using anecdotal information that is most prevalent in the counselor education literature were used to develop a tentative theory regarding experiences during the first year. This tentative theory described a constructivist sense-making process through which students use previous experiences as well as personal expectations to ultimately make sense and understand their first year in a Master’s degree counseling program.
References


Commission for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (2001).  


New York: Teachers College Press.


Title of Research Proposal: Experiences of first year Master's degree counseling students: A grounded theory.

Investigator(s) Information

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Training Module Completed? X Yes □ No (Attach Certificate as Appendix H)
(www.vp-res.ohiou.edu/cbt)

Co-investigators
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Training Module Completed?  X Yes ☐ No (Attach Certificate as Appendix H)

Anticipated Starting Date 1-1-06  Duration 1 mos 1 yrs
(Work, including recruitment, cannot begin prior to IRB approval. This date should never precede the submission date)

Funding Status
Is the researcher receiving or applying for external funding?  ☐ Yes  X No
(Note – This refers to funding from entities outside of Ohio University)

If yes, list source

(Note – If an application for funding has been submitted, a FULL copy of the funding application must accompany this form as APPENDIX G)

If yes, describe any consulting or other financial relationships with this sponsor.

Is there a payment of any kind connected with enrollment of participants on this study that will be paid to persons other than the research participants?  ☐ Yes  X No
(If yes, describe.)

Review Level
Based on the definition in the guidelines, do you believe your research qualifies for:

☐ Exempt Review  ☐ Expedited Review  ☐ Full Committee Review

X Expedited Review  Category 7

Final determination of review level will be determined by Office of Research Compliance in accordance with the categories defined in the Code of Federal Regulations

Prior Approval
If this or a similar protocol been approved by OU IRB or any other, please attach copy of approval and label as Appendix E.

Recruitment/Selection of Subjects
Estimated Number of Human Participants 9

Characteristics of subjects (check as many boxes as appropriate).
__Minors  __Physically or Mentally Disabled
__Elementary School Students  ___Adults  ___Legal Incompetency
__Secondary School Students
__Prisoners  ___Pregnant Females  _X__University Students
___Others (Specify)______________________

Briefly describe the criteria for selection of subjects (inclusion/exclusion). Include such information as age range, health status, etc. Attach additional pages if necessary.

All participants will be first year Master’s degree graduate students currently enrolled in a counseling program. Consistent with grounded theory methodology, it is important to purposefully select participants that can provide the information necessary to answer the research questions. Participants will be selected based on recommendations from the department chairs of three universities who they believe can clearly articulate their experience. Further, in order to gain maximum variation, I will request that the participants range in age, sex, race, and experience. I am intentionally gathering individuals who can clearly articulate their experiences, in order to gather a detailed, rich description of their experiences.

How will you identify and recruit prospective participants? If subjects are chosen from records, indicate who gave approval for the use of the records. If records are "private" medical or student records, provide the protocol, consent forms, letters, etc., for securing consent of the subjects for the records. Written documentation for cooperation/permission from the holder or custodian of the records should be attached. (Initial contact of subjects identified through a records search must be made by the official holder of the record, i.e. primary physician, therapist, public school official.)

I plan to contact the chair of the department at three universities (Ohio University, University of Toledo, and Kent State University) and propose my research to them, provide the benefits of such research, and provide a copy of my results upon completion of data analysis. Upon contacting the chairs, I plan to request that they recommend four to five students that they believe can clearly articulate their experiences. I will also request that the recommended students ranging in age, sex, and experience to gain maximum variation among participants. After receiving those recommendations, I will intentionally select three individuals and contact those students by phone and ask if they are willing to be interviewed.

Please describe your relationship to the potential participants, i.e. instructor of class, co-worker, etc. If no relationship, state no relationship.
No relationship

Attach copies of all recruitment tools (advertisements, posters, etc.) and label as APPENDIX B

**Performance Sites**

List all collaborating and performance sites, and provide copy of IRB approval from that site and/or letters of cooperation or support.

Kent State University
University of Toledo

**Project Description**

Please provide a brief summary of this project, using non-technical terms that would be understood by a non-scientific reader. Attach an additional page, if needed, but please limit this description to no more than one typewritten page.

The researcher will investigate the first year experiences of first year Master's degree counseling students. All of the subjects are first year graduate students in counseling. The subjects will be interviewed asking the following questions:
1) Describe your thoughts, feelings, and perceptions as a first year counseling graduate student.
2) What is it like being a first year student in a counseling program?
3) What were your assumptions regarding being in a counseling program before you began?
4) What has been the most influential event or incident so far in your first year as a counseling student?

Through qualitative analysis, themes will emerge from the subjects’ answers that will assist us in understanding the students’ experiences of their first year in a counseling program.

Please describe the specific scientific objectives (aims) of this research and any previous relevant research.

1. Gather information regarding students’ thoughts, feelings, and perceptions regarding their first year in a graduate counseling program.
2. Examine students’ experiences associated with being a new student in a graduate counseling program.
3. Ascertain students’ assumptions as they begin the counseling graduate program.
Methodology: please describe the procedures (sequentially) that will be performed/followed with human participants.

1. The researcher will contact the chairpersons at The University of Toledo, Kent State University, and Ohio University. The purpose of the research including the benefits of conducting such research will be explained to each chairperson.
2. The researcher will request a list of four to five students who the chairs believe can clearly articulate their experience and range in age, sex, and experience.
3. The researcher will intentionally select three individuals from three different universities to individually interview.
4. The researchers will analyze the participants’ responses using Grounded Theory analytic procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).
5. Consistent with Grounded Theory procedures, the researchers will contact respondents with additional clarifying questions. This process will be repeated until redundancy and saturation is achieved. Subsequent questions will be based on the analysis of data obtained during the initial interview. These questions will be more focused than the initial questions. All interviews will be designed to be non-intrusive and avoid harm to or psychological distress in the participants. A complete description of the procedures to protect participants will be given at the initiation of the interview along with the written statement of informed consent that the subjects will sign and return before being interviewed.

Describe any potential risks or discomforts of participation and the steps that will be taken to minimize them.

Participants will be interviewed by a third year doctoral student in Counselor Education. Potential risks may include negative feelings associated with the first year of the counseling program in such cases that either academically or personally the individual is having difficulties. If such a case should arise, I will have the necessary contact information for their local counseling and psychological services office.

Describe the anticipated benefits to the individual participants. If none, state that. (Note that compensation is not a benefit, but should be listed in the compensation section on the next page.)

A potential benefit to the individual participant might be that of being allowed and encouraged to reflect on their experiences as they progress through their first year of a counseling program. Further, upon analysis I will provide the participants a written copy of the results.
Describe the anticipated benefits to society and/or the scientific community. There must be some benefit to justify the use of human subjects.

The research will provide the profession of Counselor Education and universities with Counselor Education programs with a better, deeper understanding of the first year in a counseling program. Results from this research will help to build on the existing literature within Counselor Education profession regarding students’ development throughout a counseling program. This research will also provide guidance for future research to improve the pedagogy to match the students’ needs in a Counselor Education program.

Describe procedures in place to protect confidentiality. Who will have access to raw data? Will raw data be made available to anyone other than the Principal Investigator and immediate study personnel (e.g., school officials, medical personnel)? If yes, who, how, and why? Describe the procedure for sharing data. Describe how the subject will be informed that the data may be shared.

Once data is received, code numbers will be assigned to identify cases and will be saved on secure electronic media. Data will then be entered into a database using a password that only the researcher will know. Further, all audiotapes of the interviews will remained locked in a cabinet within the department of Counseling and Higher Education at Ohio University. Respondent’s contact information will be kept separately in order to complete the follow up interviews.

Will participants be: Audiotaped?  
☐ Yes  
☐ No  

☐ Yes  
☐ No  

If so, describe how/where the tapes will be stored (i.e. locked file cabinet in investigator office), who will have access to them, and at what point they will be destroyed.

All audiotapes of the interviews will remained locked in a cabinet within the department of Counseling and Higher Education at Ohio University. They will only be accessible by one key that belongs to the researcher. Once analysis is complete and the results are written and approved, all of the data will be destroyed.
Provide details of any compensation (money, course credit, gifts) being offered to participants, including how the compensation will be prorated for participants who discontinue participation prior to completion.

NA

**Instruments**
List all questionnaires, instruments, standardized tests below, with a brief description, and provide copies of each, labeled as APPENDIX C.

Grounded theory method will be employed to collect and analyze data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The process of grounded theory involves conducting an initial interview with subjects using broad biographical questions. The questions are specifically formulated to be sensitive to the phenomena under investigation, while remaining open to the unique experiences and perceptions of the subjects. Analysis will involve grounded theory procedures such as open coding, axial coding, selective coding, and coding for process for the purpose of abstracting and reconstructing data. The initial interview will result in tentative categories and relationships that will be further clarified through follow-up interviews. Questions for the follow-up interviews will be formulated to address the specific tentative categories and relationships identified in the previous round of interviews. This data collection and analysis process will be repeated until redundancy and saturation is achieved.

How will the data be analyzed? State the hypothesis and describe how the analysis of the data will test that hypothesis.

The grand research question is “What are the experiences of being a first year counseling graduate student?” The purpose is to identify these experiences and factors associated with the first year of a counseling program.

The data will be composed and analyzed using Grounded theory analytic procedures. Analysis will involve grounded theory procedures such as open coding, axial coding, selective coding, and coding for process for the purpose of abstracting and reconstructing data. The initial interview will result in tentative categories and relationships that will be further clarified through follow-up interviews. Questions for the follow-up interviews will be formulated to address the specific tentative categories and relationships identified in the previous
round of interviews. This data collection and analysis process will be repeated until redundancy and saturation is achieved.

**Informed Consent Process**  
Attach copies of all consent documents or text and label as APPENDIX A.

Informed consent is a process, not just a form. Potential participants/representatives **must** be given the information they need to make an informed decision to participate in this research. How will you provide information/obtain permission?

The participants will receive an informed consent form and will receive an explanation of the purpose of the study as well as explanation regarding the components of the informed consent form. By signing the informed consent, the participants are aware of the benefits and potential risks, their volunteer participation, and that they can withdraw from the study at any time without consequence to which they may otherwise be entitled.

How and where will the consent process occur? How will it be structured to enhance independent and thoughtful decision-making? What steps will be taken to avoid coercion or undue influence?

The consent process will occur before any of the individual interviews take place. After explanation of the study and the consent form, the participants will be provided time to thoroughly read through the consent form and ask any possible questions. The consent forms will be taken to each site in which the interviews are conducted. Further, I will remind the participants that their participation is voluntary and there are no penalties or incentives attached to participation.

Will the investigator(s) be obtaining all of the informed consents? **X** Yes  □ No
If not, identify by name and training who will be describing the research to subjects/representatives and inviting their participation?

Will all adult participants have the capacity to give informed consent? If not, explain procedures to be followed.

Yes
If any participants will be minors, include procedures/form for parental consent and for the assent from the minor.

NA

Are you requesting a waiver or alteration of Informed Consent? □ Yes  X No

An IRB may approve a consent that does not include, or alters, some or all of the elements of informed consent. Provide justifications below for the waiver.

a. Describe how the proposed research presents no more than minimal risk to participants.

NA

b. Why will a waiver of informed consent not adversely affect the rights and welfare of participants?

NA

c. Why is it impracticable to carry out the research without a waiver or alteration of informed consent?

NA

d. How will pertinent information be provided to participants, if appropriate, at a later date?

NA

Even if waiver of written informed consent is granted, you will likely be required to obtain verbal permission that reflects the elements of informed consent (if appropriate). Please specify below information to be read/given to participants.

NA
Will participants be deceived or incompletely informed regarding any aspect of the study? □ Yes  X No

If so, provide rationale for use of deception.

NA

Attach copies of post-study debriefing information and label as APPENDIX D.
Ohio University Consent Form

Title of Research: Experiences of first-year Master’s degree counseling students: A grounded theory

Principal Investigator: Cornelia A. Farrell
Co-Investigator: ________________________________
Department: Counseling and Higher Education

Federal and university regulations require a signed consent for participation in research involving human subjects. After reading the statement below, please indicate your consent by filling in your name and date and returning this consent form to the principal investigator, Cornelia A. Farrell

Explanation of the Study
The principal investigator is investigating your experiences associated with being a first year Master’s degree counseling student. The investigator will be gathering information regarding students’ thoughts, feelings, and perceptions regarding their first year in a counseling program, examining students’ experiences associated with being a new student in a counseling program, and ascertaining students’ assumptions as they begin a counseling program. Consistent with Grounded theory analytic procedures, the investigators may contact you with additional clarifying questions.

Risks and Discomforts
The investigator anticipates minimal to no risk by participating in this research and is prepared if potential risk arises.

Benefits
This research will provide the principal investigator with a better understanding of students’ experiences during their first year in a counseling program. Results from this research will help to build on the existing literature within the Counselor Education profession regarding students’ development throughout a counseling program. This research will also provide guidance for future research to improve the pedagogy to match students’ needs in a Counselor Education program.

Confidentiality and Records
Once data is received, code numbers will be assigned to identify cases and will be saved on electronic media. Data will then be entered into a database using a password that only the principal researcher will know. Further, all audiotapes of the interviews will remained locked in a cabinet within the department of Counseling and Higher Education. Participant contact information will be kept separately in order to complete the follow-up interviews. While participant’s quotes may be used, no identifying information will be
included in the final analysis or write up of this project.

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact Cornelia A. Farrell at htalker1@yahoo.com or Dr. Dana Heller Levitt, Faculty Advisor, at levitt@ohio.edu. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664.

I certify that I have read and understand this consent form and agree to participate as a subject in the research described. I agree that known risks to me have been explained to my satisfaction and I understand that no compensation is available from Ohio University and its employees for any injury resulting from my participation in this research. I certify that I am 18 years of age or older. By returning this consent form, I have read and agree to consent to be a participant in this study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time during the study without penalty or loss of any benefits to which I may otherwise be entitled. I certify that I was provided a copy of this consent form to keep.

Research Participant: _______________________________ Date: ___________________